AJET CONNECT

News & Events, Arts & Culture, Lifestyle, Community

MAY 2020

Meeting without Meeting up

Ohara Gozaimasu

Rolling Through a Metropolis: Skateboarding and Connection in Tokyo

Kamikatsu: More Than Just Zero Waste

Japan's Northernmost Irish Pub

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

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Kia ora, Tēnā koutou katoa!

May is already here, can you believe it? Somehow April seemed to happen in a flash and also at a sloth's pace. Lately it's been difficult to find words to describe the state of the world, but I've been finding pockets of positivity within this time. One big takeaway for me has been switching off from the news. You *don't* need to be updated with the constant goings-on of the world right now. Switch off and give yourself a break. Whether you are in quarantine back home or in self-isolation here in Japan, maybe you can find comfort in the idea that there is no *correct* way to spend this time. You are *allowed* to take it slow. Some have thrived in this stay-home environment, while others have found it quite challenging. And it's simply okay to have differing experiences during this unprecedented time. What we can keep doing is handwashing, social distancing, and checking in with our mates to see how they are doing. An easy, "how's things going?" message can make a big difference in someone's day if they are feeling low during this time. I hope that this month's issue of *CONNECT* provides you with some thought-provoking content. If you find something interesting, please share it with your friends and family. We'd appreciate it!

My picks for the month of May, in a somewhat of an order:

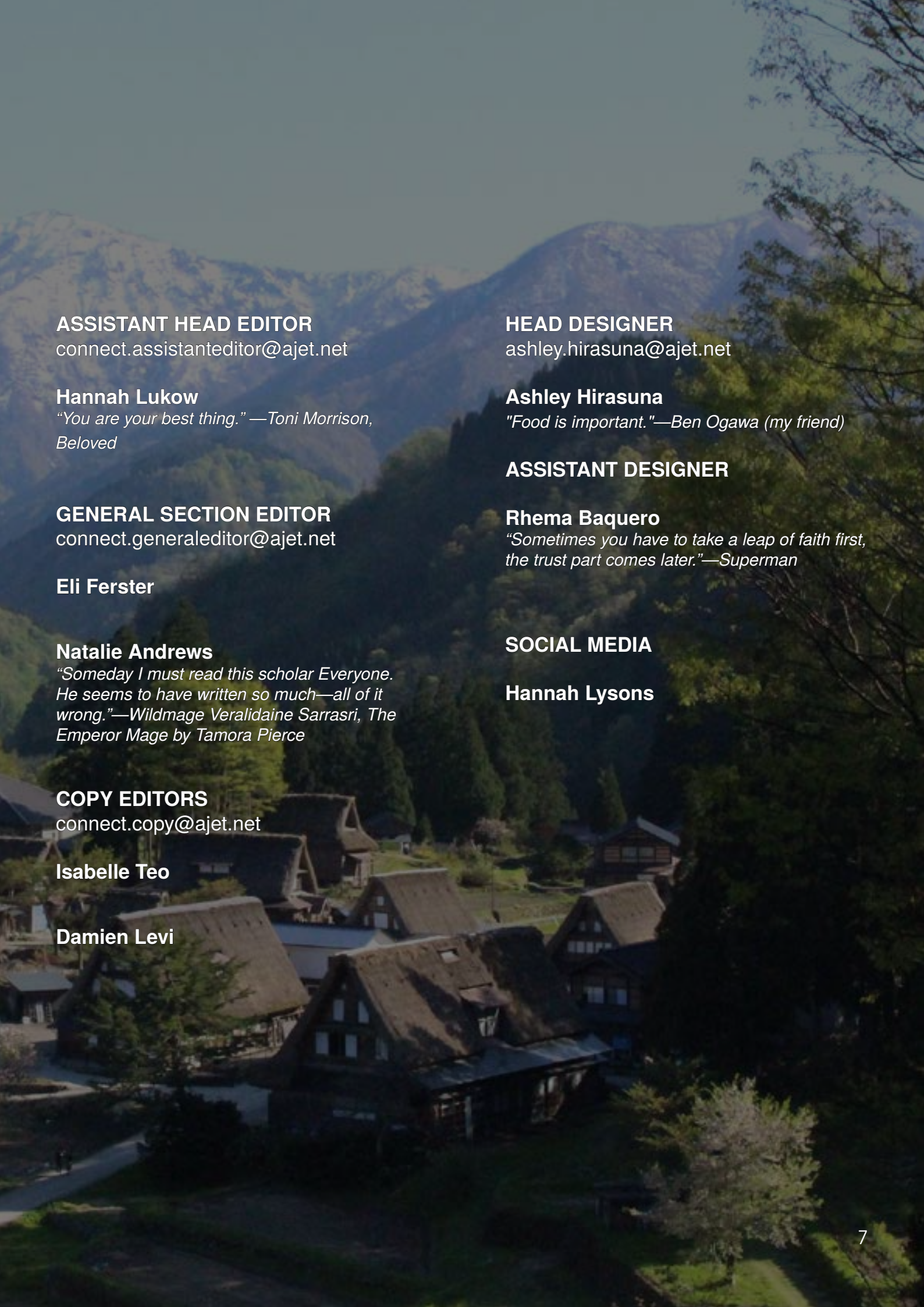
1. The first one on the list is pretty self-explanatory: **Meeting without Meeting up** presented by Events. Editor Eli writes about how different groups have maneuvered meetings on online platforms. Community is paramount now more than ever!
2. Surprisingly, another one of my top picks is a story from Events (who would've guessed given the times!) about fond memories of participating in Ohara festivals in **Ohara Gozaimasu**. It's a warm tale of a Tokyoite performing in a local festival. While such festival performances are very common in *inaka* areas of Japan, it's harder to achieve in larger cities where the communal spirit is sometimes less present.
3. The next piece remains in Tokyo with **Rolling Through a Metropolis: Skateboarding and Connection in Tokyo**, presented by Sports. One could say it's 360 degrees . . . Did my terrible joke land? I particularly liked the contrast between street and park skateboarding.
4. The next piece is about one of the first places I learned of in Japan: Kamikatsu. I learnt about this place through YouTube videos showing the insane recycling system that they had in place. It even got an honourable mention in my JET application! I had almost forgotten about it until our Culture Editor Tayler sourced this piece. Read more about this magical place in **Kamikatsu: More Than Just Zero Waste**.
5. This month, Travel presents something a little different with **Japan's Northernmost Irish Pub**, about a charming wee pub in Hokkaido and finding a small slice of home's comforts in an unexpected place. I challenge you to not to read this article in a friendly Irishman's voice like I did.

The submission deadline for the 2020 Art Issue has been extended until the **14th of May**! We are accepting creative writing, photography and visual art. Find more information on the website: https://c-theartissue.tumblr.com/

Alice Ridley
Head Editor
2nd Year Gunma ALT

Alice R.

Photo: Ashley Hirasuna



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“You are your best thing.” —Toni Morrison, Beloved

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“Someday I must read this scholar Everyone. He seems to have written so much—all of it wrong.”—Wildmage Veralidaine Sarrasri, The Emperor Mage by Tamora Pierce

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"Food is important."—Ben Ogawa (my friend)

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“Sometimes you have to take a leap of faith first, the trust part comes later.”—Superman

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“It is said that your life flashes before your eyes just before you die. That is true, it’s called Life.” —Terry Pratchett, The Last Continent

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Rebecca Ruth
"Stand out. Someone has to. It is easy to follow along. It can feel strange to do or say something different. But without that unease, there is no freedom. Remember Rosa Parks. The moment you set an example, the spell of the status quo is broken, and others will follow." —On Tyranny; Twenty Lessons From the Twentieth Century, by Timothy Snyder

Photo: Ethan Wang (Kobe)

Ohara Gozaimasu

Mike Clapis (Tokyo)

Dogenzaka. Whether or not you've heard the name, you have most certainly seen it in pictures and videos. This shopping district is home to the densely-packed Shibuya Scramble crossing, a favorite location for tourist selfies and impromptu interview segments for NHK. The Shibuya 109 shopping mall proudly towers over the space like a watchful mother, bearing gifts of cosmetics and neon activewear commercials. It might be the most famously crowded city block in Tokyo, which makes it a good contender for most crowded worldwide.

As a Tokyo resident, I avoid Dogenzaka at all costs. Just the thought of the inevitable train-cramming that awaits on my commute to and from the place is enough to get a claustrophobe like me breathing into a paper bag. So if you told me when I first got here in 2014 that I'd be dancing up the legendary Shibuya thoroughfare with around 2,000 others wearing a bright cotton *happi* and matching headband under the hot Tokyo sun, sidewalks lined with cameras capturing every moment, I might have been a little skeptical.

The Ohara Matsuri, as this event is known, has its origins in Kagoshima, where it is renowned as the largest dance festival in Southern Kyushu. Every year, the city floods with troupes of dancers and street performers keeping Edo-era Kyushu


南高校同窓会
インターナショナル

The 2017 Ohara crew posing after practice in a downtown dance studio.
Photo: Mike Clapis

The 2017 team practices in a circle to make sure everyone is in sync.
Photo: Mike Clapis

artforms alive. It was started to honor the efforts of Kagoshima's post-WWII reconstruction period, but the Tokyo branch of the festival (which began in 1996) is held between Shibuya's Dogenzaka and Bunkamura streets and celebrates the bonds of friendship bridging Shibuya and Kagoshima. In my research of historical links between the two cities, I discovered that Kagoshima was the birthplace of both Togo Heihachiro, a naval hero during the Russo-Japanese war whose shrine can be found in Harajuku, as well as sculptor Teru Ando, who made the original version of the Hachiko statue that stands outside Shibuya Station to this day.

Street vendors and convenience stores share in the promotion of Kyushu tourism with prefectural delicacies. Spectators can expect to see scores of local dance crews representing their neighborhoods with specifically-designed uniforms of happi and headbands, and parading the length of Shibuya's biggest shopping district set to the rhythm of taiko drums and flutes. So how did an uncoordinated, culturally illiterate JET like myself end up in the middle of it all?

I joined the International Ohara dance group in 2018 at the behest of my girlfriend, another JET who had friends already participating. She sold it to me as a fun way to bond with our fellow Tokyo JETs. I foresaw a potential problem in the form of my two left feet, but I knew I'd be alright once I saw the choreography. Festival dancing consists of deliberate, full-body sweeps favoring smoothness over speed or technical ability. This makes it easy for onlookers of any age to jump in after watching only a few cycles. This open-door policy makes sense—*matsuri* are famous for fostering a sense of community and cultural sharing through dance, and anyone can join the march behind the dancers during Ohara, like an Edo Japan conga line.

I contacted former TJET Social Chair Marlene Pierce to learn more about the group's formation in 2017.

"We were actually contacted by a guy [called Tommy] who was interested in pairing with Tokyo JETs for a cultural opportunity. He pitched the idea of having an all-JET team to the TJET board and we all decided it was too good of an opportunity to pass up. One of the other council members, Rebecca Harkness, agreed to co-captain the group and we were off and running!"

Another former JET, Farshad Khansari, elaborates. "Tommy started it all. It was nice to be able to participate in a local festival. A lot of Tokyo JETs say they missed out on being part of a community since they weren't placed in a smaller town or village, and this was a great opportunity to have that 'Japan' experience in a big city."

Tomokazu Mistudome (aka Tommy) is a native of Kagoshima prefecture and now lives in Yokohama as a local promoter of cultural exchange. From my experience with the group, Tommy had a hand in every aspect of our practice and performance, and made arrangements for us to share a practice space

and reception venue with another dance team. When Farshad announced he was moving back to the US, Tommy even organized his going-away party.

The practice sessions I attended in 2018 with the rest of the crew were held every weekend over the course of a few months in a two-storey house just outside downtown Shibuya. We practiced in the home's large tatami rooms with an experienced team of middle-aged and senior dancers who fed us a constant stream of compliments and omiyage during lunch breaks.

Dancers are given three routines to learn: the "Ohara Bushi" (Kagoshima's most famous Bon Odori dance, from which the festival gets its namesake), the "Kagoshima Han'ya Bushi", and the "Shibuya Ondo". Each dance's historical value can be understood when you realize the moves correspond to the natural geography of their place of origin. I recalled learning this during a practice session—one of our teachers was demonstrating the proper wrist rotation and gradual raising of the arms in the Ohara Bushi steps, palms open and fingers splayed out, which she likened to smoke rising from a volcano.

Marlene spoke more on this detail. "A lot of the flat arm moments are representative of flat grassy plains, arms make the peaks of mountains, hands swish above heads to represent tall fields of grass swaying in the wind. Other dances have the casting of fishing nets into oceans or depictions of rising or setting suns." A quick YouTube search of these dances in action prove the importance of getting these naturalistic details just right.

Since joining the event three years ago, JET's International Ohara team has won awards for their efforts, and in fact their attention to detail could stem from the knowledge that they will stand out as foreign ambassadors. Maybe this is something all JETs implicitly understand—that when all eyes are on you, you become extra careful not to make mistakes.

But this isn't to make the Ohara Matsuri sound contentious, or even competitive. In a land governed by social hierarchies, everyone taking part in the festival can appreciate this is one venue where rules and convention take a backseat to fun and cultural exchange. It is, after all, a loving tribute between the sister cities of Shibuya and Kagoshima. The International Ohara team stretches the boundaries of that sisterhood to encompass nations from across the globe. Even when COVID-19 has rendered the event all but cancelled for 2020, there is a strong feeling among members of the team that many of us will be back next year, ready to dance alongside our new friends.

Readers who would like to learn more about the TJET Ohara Group or get involved themselves can contact the International Ohara 2020 Facebook group, or message the group moderators Caitlin Fox Orwell & Kathy Agüero.

Mike Clapis is a former Tokyo JET who lives in Nerima with his girlfriend and a tomato plant. He enjoys swinging in hammocks and collecting Civil War chess sets. He subsists entirely on a diet of yakisoba and milk candy. He is an okay dungeon master but wants to get better.

Ohara Bushi at the Shibuya-Kagoshima Ohara Matsuri, 2018
Photo: Mike Clapis

The group takes home another award, this time 2nd Place overall in 2018.
Photo: Mike Clapis

Tommy poses with the team after winning an award for their performance in 2017.
Photo: Mike Clapis

Leila's online meetup.
Photo: Leila Koizumi

Meeting Up Without Meeting Up

THE LANDSCAPE OF MEETUPS IN STAY-AT-HOME JAPAN

By Eli Ferster (Kyoto)

Leila's meetup, in its previous format.
Photo: Leila Koizumi

The community centers are closed, cafes and other meeting spots vacant, but for many, online Meetups keep them connected to the events they've come to count on. Indeed, compared to some local clubs and activities which only get together through scheduled meetings and physical spaces, groups that have always been run through Meetups—an app for finding and organizing events and gatherings—are much better equipped to make the jump over to the internet—give or take a few hurdles.

While the ever-popular sports Meetups are largely off the table, it's heartening to see, browsing through the app, that many others have shown surprising resilience. "*On-nomi*", a contraction of online *nomikai* (drinking party), have sprung up in groups usually catering to izakaya meetups and bar-hopping nights out, here offering BYOB online socializing. But perhaps the most suited for this transition are the language exchange groups, which require no special equipment or ambience.

"We started the online session in mid-march," says Leila Koizumi, organizer of the Osaka area Meetup Learn Japanese and Make Japanese Friends. "Originally we wanted to just end it at the end of March but now that the virus situation is getting worse we have to continue on."

While the online format does pose some challenges, both on the technical and atmospheric side, Leila has been able to continue her three-times-a-week Meetup without significant disruption. "I think the good side would be we can give more attention to each individual participant," she considers. "In a very confined space online, multiple people cannot talk at the same time otherwise it's very hard to understand. So it's like an individual interaction. When a few people are talking to each other, the others keep quiet and observe the conversation. So the quality of the learning is quite good. I didn't really expect it to be this meaningful, to be honest."

This intimacy, however, seems to come at the expense of spontaneity. "It's definitely less exciting," continues Leila. "When we meet online, it becomes more of a classroom style. It's really controlled. We usually meet at a cafe, and each member can talk to the person next to them. Just spark up some conversation. But it's not that possible online. Little chats that really connect people—it's hard to carry that on in this online environment."

For a well-established group like Leila's, this shift in environment is nonetheless viable. "We're very fortunate because we have regular members and they keep coming back all the time," she reflects. "I think this kind of online environment would be very difficult if we kept having first-timers all the time. Me or other teachers would have a very difficult time understanding the level of the conversation or personal interest in general. But since our members are pretty much regulars, we know them very well, we know what they like, we know what kind of lifestyle they live. It's a lot easier. When they struggle or when they hesitate we can kind of sense that, and we can throw in some little support."

For other, less-established groups, this lack of an established community has made the transition to online next to impossible.

"I had really bad timing," remarks Tamara, organizer of a Meetup called Tokyo American Cooking and English Class. "I started my meetup around the end of February and I got a lot of messages from people saying they were looking forward to my first meetup. But due to my schedule, I couldn't organize my first Meetup until last month when things started to get bad with COVID-19."

Since then, Tamara's online Meetups have had scattered and unreliable attendance. Granted, an online session is very different from her initial vision, which involved a full kitchen setup in a community center.

"I use Zoom and it's free for 45 minutes, so I try to pick things I can do in a short amount of time and that other people can do at home easily in front of their laptop," she explains. "I want people to either be able to watch me or be able to follow along easily without having to use their stove or oven etc. Ice cream in a bag is easy and fun. Just need some milk, salt, ice, some zip lock bags, and strong arms and patience for shaking. And just add whatever flavorings or fruit you like. Or crushed cookies."

But even for meetups with established communities, transitioning to an online format isn't always a top priority. For many gaming Meetups, already existing online gaming communities seem to swallow up Meetup attendees, even for things like tabletop gaming.

Rum balls from one of Tamara's cooking classes. Photo: Tamara

"There are (and have been for some time) many ways to do online play including a plethora of Board Game apps as well as specialised software like Table Top Simulator (Which allows you to simulate almost any board game available, so long as you or someone else can put in the time to design it in their engine)," explains Graham, one of organizers of the meetup Board Gamers of Osaka.

Board Gamers of Osaka, which typically meets in a bar called The Hearth Osaka, has yet to post any online events on their Meetups page. Another gaming meetup organizer, Japan International Gamers Guild has likewise cancelled all upcoming events and left it to members to organize on their own via the group's Discord page.

On top of that, for meetups operating out of a specific locale like *Board Gamers of Osaka*, losing the benefits of bringing people into your bar or cafe through the meetup could remove much of the appeal of hosting these meetups in the first place. Business concerns like this can have a constraining effect on an organizer's view of online viability, especially if attendance is scattered.

"Originally I made my events only ¥100. But I decided to make it ¥1,000 because I still have to pay meetup fees every month whether people come or not," explains Tamara. "Also, even though the class is online I still felt like I wanted to be paid for my time and for buying the ingredients."

Luckily, whether the transition has been smooth or turbulent, there are still some unforeseen silver linings to the online situation.

"Since we have been doing our sessions online, we can kind of bring back some returnees and talk to them," explains Leila. "One person came back this morning and he was logging in from Brisbane, and there are two members in Pittsburg who often take our Saturday morning session, and my colleague in Toronto . . . since we're meeting anyway for the language exchange, it's easy to invite each other." What was once a local space can easily make the leap to an international one once it moves online, provided the community or the interest is strong enough.

Eli Ferster is a second-year ALT in Kyoto Prefecture and a General Section Editor for ***CONNECT****. He hopes to join some online meetups in the future, if for nothing else than the novelty of going out for digital drinks.*

Photo by Windows on Unsplash

LANGUAGE THAT LETS YOU WORK FROM HOME

コンピューター言語

(*konpyu-ta gengo* Computer Languages)

Jay C. (Tokyo)

Working in ソフト (sofuto, software) in Japan

I know English, a bit of Japanese, as well as Ruby, C, C+++, HTML, CSS, and JavaScript. For those who don't know, most of those are computer languages. They're how a programmer can make a website, program, or application. A computer only understands binary: a language of 0 and 1. In order to communicate with the computer, a programmer has to use languages that can be translated into binary for the computer to use. Programming languages are a middle ground of the way that humans think and the way that computers process information.

Let's look at the letter A. Laptop and phones can't actually understand A. To a computer, A is 01000001. That's binary code for the number 65, which has been assigned to display A on computer screens.

It's possible to type out that binary code, but it's definitely not easy for humans to use. So it makes much more sense to use a computer language, like HTML, which the processor can translate into binary for the computer to use.

A lot of people do this type of work at a desk. I work from my bed.

My day starts when I wake up at 9:15a.m. I do my morning routine. I check my messages, emails, and Reddit for either something funny or something newsy. After my eyes have had time to wake up, I'm up. I brush my teeth, do my hair, and get back in bed. It's time to start work.

I 起動 (*kidou,* start up) my laptop and prep for my daily check-in. My co-workers will ask me what I'm working on, how my progress is going, and we'll talk about deadlines and problems and pass the time for 30 to 45 minutes. I 作成 (*sakuse*, write up) a quick outline of the work I did yesterday to prepare. Now it's 10:13a.m.. I put on a shirt, take a seat, and pop open Zoom. After a minute, I see the familiar faces of two of my co-workers.

"Hey, guys. Good evening!" I say with a smile.

"And good morning to you!" they reply.

It's 6:45p.m. in LA, and they are wrapping up their day. If there's a problem they are stuck on, they'll have added it to the bug tracker. We'll talk about what I'll focus on while they're sleeping. If the code-gods have been kind, when they wake up those issues will be marked as solved and they'll see updated code pushes to the various Git branches that I've worked on. Everything's up on the password-protected staging server that we all have access to. Once my code is reviewed and approved, they'll push it live.

During the day I'm free to choose when and where I work. I've just moved to a new city, so I'll explore cafes and co-working spaces until I find a few that I fancy. Of course with Covid-19, many places are closed. And it's raining today anyway, so I'll just stay inside. The living room is warm and dry.

Some might think it takes a lot of self-discipline to work from home. There are no shortages of distractions if that's what you desire.

But really, I just love to code. The problems are my distractions.

Everything is a puzzle. Big problems are a series of smaller problems. The work is just like an addictive phone game: I keep playing to chase my dopamine hits.

My background is as a contractor, so I'm used to working alone. I work from home, but that doesn't appeal to everyone. Of course, you could also work in a Japanese company, but that comes with some challenges. If your Japanese skills aren't high, it would be really difficult to collaborate with coworkers. And, of course, there's a significant pay difference

between American and Japanese companies. You'll make a lot less money if you work in a Japanese company.

There are other ways to work in Computer Sciences in Japan, however. For six hours on Saturdays, I go to a science-focused school that conducts classes in English, and I teach a small group of Japanese students an advanced programming (プログラミング, *puroguramingu*) class.There are beginner classes during the week, but I'm not available to teach that because I need to be able to do any last-minute work for my job in LA.

According to my boss, Japanese schools will be required to offer programming classes in the coming years. She sees this as an opportunity to expand her business. But it's also an opportunity for people living here, who might want to transition to teaching computer science in Japanese schools. Given the current situation, it's a natural time for people to increase their technology skillset. If that sounds interesting to you, the first things you should look at are the three fundamental languages that everything on a computer is made with: HTML, CSS, and Javascript.

The Basics

A typical web application is broken up into front-end and back-end. The front-end is what you, the 利用 (*ryousha*, user), see.

If you're looking at Instagram from the web browser on your computer, what you're seeing is the result of many lines of code written in HTML, CSS, and Javascript. HTML is where the content is, like words and pictures. CSS places and formats that context with color and other visual design elements. Javascript enables the web page to execute actions, like clicking a button.

Each of those languages has thousands of libraries and tools built on top of and around them. Some come and go like a quick fad (remember JNCO jeans?), and some stick around . . . but at the core of all are those languages. But if you're looking at Instagram on your phone, a different set of technologies are used. Android and iOS use different languages, and rarely will you find a 開発者 (*kaihatsusha* developer) specializing in both sets.

The Tools

No matter what front-end you're looking at, they're all communicating with the same back-end. The "business logic", as they say, is responsible for the stuff you don't see. The building, shifting, combining, searching, and storing of the raw data. There are many many many options for the tech that you can use to build your back-end with. The big languages are PHP, Ruby, Python, Java, and C#. On top of that, you'll have thousands of techs and tools for each.

There are enough flavors to make Baskin Robins blush.

The particular front-end and back-end technologies chosen for a project is called the "tech stack." If you're a new startup, you'll need to find Full-Stack Developers, who are familiar with both the front-end and back-end of your tech stack.

Now Make It Social

Maybe it's natural that the most popular jobs worked over the internet are the same jobs that helped to create it. Especially in its infancy, the typical software developer role was held mostly by introverted, shy people who loved to nerd out. But they also loved to share their work, and craved to tinker with and build upon others'. And so, they built a suite of tools to accomplish this socially-entangled-yet-distant work in the comfort of their own home. SVN evolved into Git, which is used to collaboratively 修正 (*shuusei*, edit) shared codebases. Unit-tests act as gatekeepers. Each new code commit is rigorously tested. If there is a single failure, then the code is rejected. After being approved, the code just needs a standardizing polish. Just like the unique tilt in your handwriting and the way you write your "y," each programmer has a slightly different writing style for their code. So a syntax program re-formats it for consistency.

You can't remove the human element from this. Throughout the process, trackers provide the entire team direction—a shared to-do list of features and bugs. When everyone has agreed on a stopping point, a stamp is placed and it's packaged up. Version 1.0, tagged. These are the Continuous-Integration tools that make up the framework of our collaborative, remote software teams. They scale from tiny three-member teams like me and my friends in LA, all the way up to the thousands that work at Google, Facebook, Apple, and Netflix.

I've heard a lot of chatter during these quarantine times.

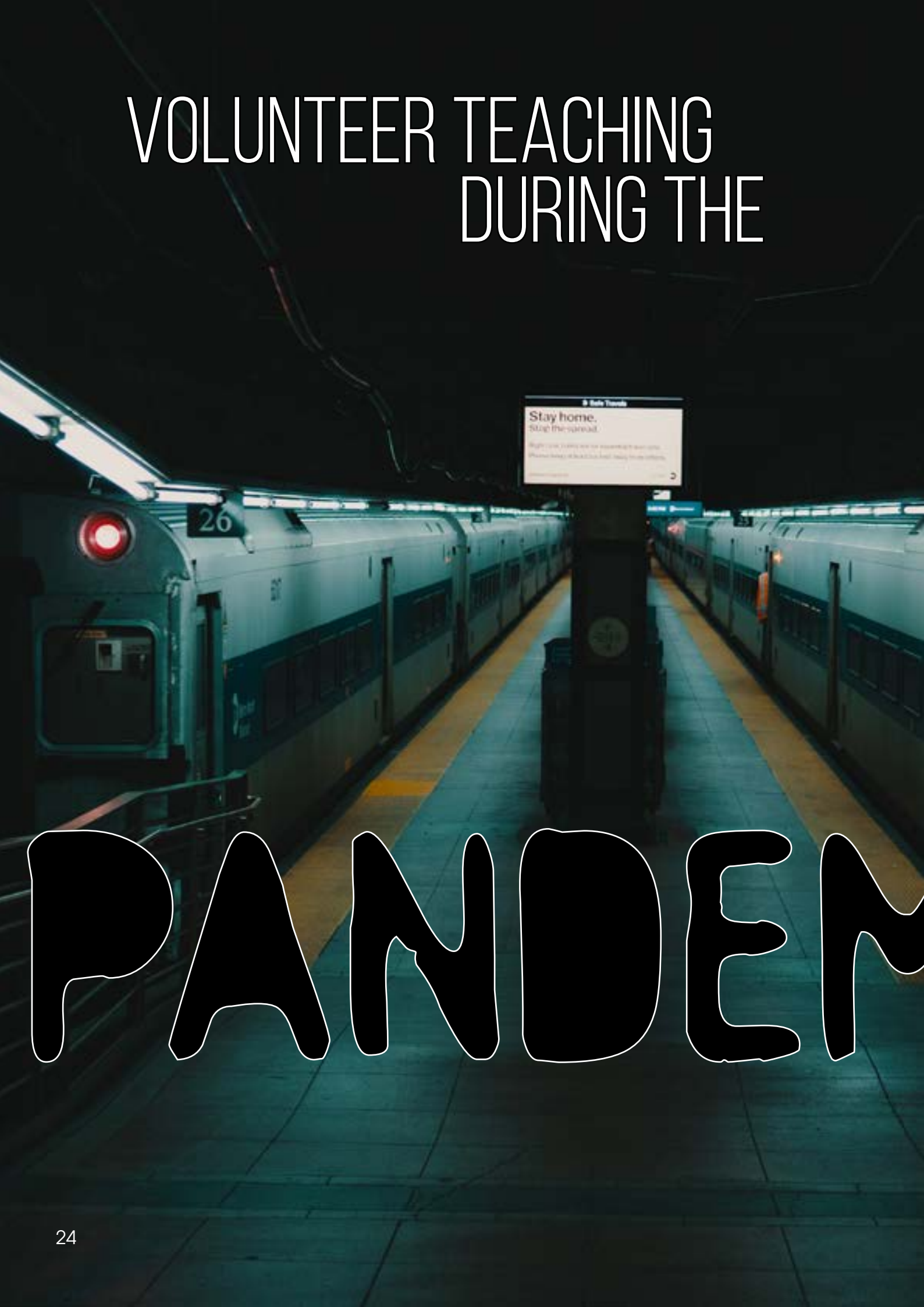
Many people are realizing that working from home is not only possible, but preferable to a daily commute. It's better for the environment, and in many cases for our mental and physical health.

For most people, there's a good middle-ground to be found between the two. Collaborative tools are the key to making it all work. The person who knows your role best is you. Think about what these tools would look like, and if you're feeling an entrepreneurial itch, hire a graphic designer to draw up a UI for it. Pitch it to some venture capitalists, and then hire me to build it for you. :)

Jay C. is a guy who spends way too much time on his computer, but also loves it. He remembers his dad's good advice: "One of the hardest things you'll need to find in life is balance." and "The biggest hurdle you'll ever have to jump is from ear to ear." Still working on both . . .

Photo: Markus Spiske on Unsplash

VOLUNTEER TEACHING DURING THE PANDEMIC



Rachel Boellstorff (Okayama)

My world right now is small.

I've been isolated in my apartment for weeks now. When I began to feel the first twinges of illness, I confined myself to my apartment. Even though classes were cancelled, I still felt guilty about not being in the office. I missed the interactions I had with my students and the rewards of teaching. Most of the time I was certain that I was right to be cautious, but sometimes I wondered if I was overreacting. Japan seemed to be churning on as usual, other than the school shutdowns.

Was I wrong? Maybe everything was fine.

Maybe the pandemic would never really come to Japan in a drastic way, and maybe I just had a cold. But the news I was seeing from other countries told me that things really were serious, so I stuck to my initial decision and did not leave or see another human being.

That disconnect between the stress I felt about the global situation and the business-as-usual atmosphere in Japan was only intensified as I had more time to look at the international conversations. I found myself scrolling Twitter and news sites, watching depressing news roll in relentlessly. As the world got worse, so did my physical condition. I only had a fever at first. Trouble breathing came next, with an unbearable pressure as if my lungs had been shoved into a tiny box. There wasn't enough room to get the air I needed. Confined to my apartment, looking at the same walls every day, there was somehow even less air to breathe.

Then one day, I saw a tweet from an educator in the USA, who wanted volunteers to teach online classes to the many children in the United States whose schools were now closed. They were in quarantine, and their parents were likely still working. I followed the link to Youth Remote Learning, and read about the need for people to teach remotely.

I volunteered. But at first, I wavered—what could I possibly have to offer? While I work as a teacher and design most of my own lessons here in Japan, I never taught in my own country and wasn't certified to teach any young children. My childhood scores in geography were abysmal, and I didn't have textbooks to teach any basic subjects.

Scrolling down the list of offered classes, I found a myriad of options. Poetry, African art and culture, even a class engaging with the concept of poverty! There were classes on anything the teachers were passionate enough to teach.

There were classes I would have loved to take when I was younger, with so many different interests. It didn't matter that these courses aren't the typical education—a pandemic isn't a typical time.

I had something to offer here. I signed up, explained my qualifications, and offered two potential courses, eventually settling on Japanese 101. I could offer a basic introduction to the language for children who might otherwise never have had the option.

Now, I teach a one-hour weekly class to children from all over North America as a volunteer. Even though my school is closed, I get to teach other students and help them to grow and succeed in their goals.

I am not a fluent speaker of Japanese. However, I realized that I don't have to be advanced in order to teach things like hiragana and common phrases. Those foundational Japanese skills are satisfying intellectual curiosity and will hopefully encourage my students to learn more, on their own and in other classrooms in the future. I started with the activities that I remember from Japanese 101: hiragana memorization, short vocabulary lists, and practice speaking. My experience teaching English to Japanese students is not dissimilar to teaching Japanese to American students. I think that a lot of people who live in Japan could do what I'm doing.

Since I don't have a curriculum, I found online resources that I could use, including videos that we can screen share in the class zoom. My class has children from upper elementary school up to high school age, but when signing up to teach a class, the volunteer can choose which age groups, time frames, and frequencies they are willing to take on. If you'd like to propose a class of your own, here is the Google Form. There's a high demand for Japanese language classes, because a lot of students have been exposed to the anime and manga that drew a lot of ALTs to working in Japan. You don't have to be ペラペラ(*pera pera*, fluent) to teach hiragana and how to ask the time. After I started teaching it, other students kept asking to join, so I caught them up in individual sessions. But there's a lot more students than I can teach by myself. If you can teach English to Japanese students, then please consider teaching Japanese to English-speaking students. You can use the same classroom skills to promote learning.

It isn't easy to feel useless—like the world is on fire and hurtling towards an unknown future, and all you can do is watch. It isn't easy to know that your friends and family are struggling half a world away. It's not easy to struggle alone, either. I hit lows of

Rachel is a fourth year JET in Okayama Pre
the current NAJET Chair. She lives with her
finishes up her Master's degree from Ameri
She has recently learned how to make carro
easier than predicted.

efecture and
dogs as she
can University.
ot cake, and it's

Photo: Anshu A on Unsplash

exhaustion and depression, and I had days when I could not get enough oxygen to walk around my apartment. I don't know what I would have done if there weren't other ALTs nearby who I could ask to leave groceries outside my front door. I'm not sure that a person can get through a pandemic without community connections. I can't even guess at how much longer life is going to be this way, as the projections seem to change every week.

For me, the uncertainty might be the worst. I never got a COVID-19 test, so I may never know if that's what I've been struggling with. If that wasn't the COVID-19 virus, then I'm not at all ready to get hit by another lung problem.

I know this is a stressful time for everyone, and everyone deals with stress in different ways.
I tend to spiral, to delve into literature and read about everything

For me, the only thing that helps is to find something I can do—not focus on the things I can't control.

that causes me anxiety, and progressively just become more anxious and stressed. But finding something to occupy my mind and time helps me regain some of the control I feel I've lost—figuring out lesson plans for a subject I've never taught, how to teach online, how to foster a sense of community with students I'll never meet in person. It's also rewarding to see that the experience I've gained working in Japanese classrooms transfers to teaching in other ways.

I really recommend this program to anyone who has the Japanese skills and willingness to be up late for zoom calls with students in North America. If you want to volunteer in other ways during this international crisis, please keep an eye out for some National AJET initiatives such as the Sew-A-Thon mask-making event, or even propose your own alternatives. There's plenty that we can do as individuals. Hospitals will need blood with COVID antibodies, and people in your community might need no-contact grocery delivery or other assistance. The National AJET website has detailed information about how to donate blood in Japan, if you are interested. And of course, if you are ill, please reach out to your community for aid.

It's hard to live in a small world. But reaching out to help others makes it easier to push those boundaries out and get some room to breathe.

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—Billie Holiday

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Photo: Megan Luedtke

Kimono Remake 101:
a primer to combining tradition, creativity, and sustainability

Emilia Bergoglio

Since I moved to Japan I've been fascinated by its rich cultural history. As a sewist, of course I was deeply interested in the *kimono*. The national dress of Japan is an unmistakable symbol of this nation, as well as being a technically interesting garment. Its shape has been mostly unchanged for centuries, whereas the patterns, either woven or painted on the fabric have changed dramatically depending on vogue and available resources.

Any person who's exploring Tokyo and interested in thrifting (or not!) cannot escape the seemingly endless number of secondhand kimono for sale, often for very little money. Sometimes these kimono are true antique treasures in wearable condition, but more often than not they are actually unwearable due to stains, mold, or moth holes. Having started sewing for ethical reasons, I was saddened by the exorbitant amount of beautiful kimono left unwanted in secondhand markets, forgotten inside *tansu* (traditional Japanese chest drawer), or shredded to make insulation, so I started accumulating quite a collection.

To my great pleasure—not to mention apartment space management—I found out that kimono remake is totally a thing, and it's an integral part of kimono culture too. From bags to *haneri* (decorative collar used on the *nagajuban*, a form of kimono underwear) to even nappies (once the kimono is too old to be used for literally anything else), there is no shortage of uses for—and ideas on how to use—vintage kimono. Today, I'd like to give you a primer on kimono remake, including where to source the kimono, how to prepare it, and some ideas for projects.

My recommended places to source secondhand kimono:

1

Setagaya Boroichi

This twice annual market is probably the golden standard when it comes to secondhand kimono. There's a bit for every taste and budget.

2

Nippori Textile Town

There are several shops which sell secondhand kimono here, but the majority are for wearing and not for remaking. Have a look around to find what best suits you.

3

Heiwajima Koutoichi

This is another secondhand market, held frequently in Ueno. See schedule here.

4

Kikuya in Asakusa

Another place where you can buy kimono for wearing, usually for 1000 yen apiece. (Since these kimono are in wearable condition, it may be better to use them as kimono and not as a fabric.)

5

Online on **Yahoo! Auction** and **Mercari**

Just type "kimono remake" or "kimono recycling" and you'll find plenty of options for different budgets.

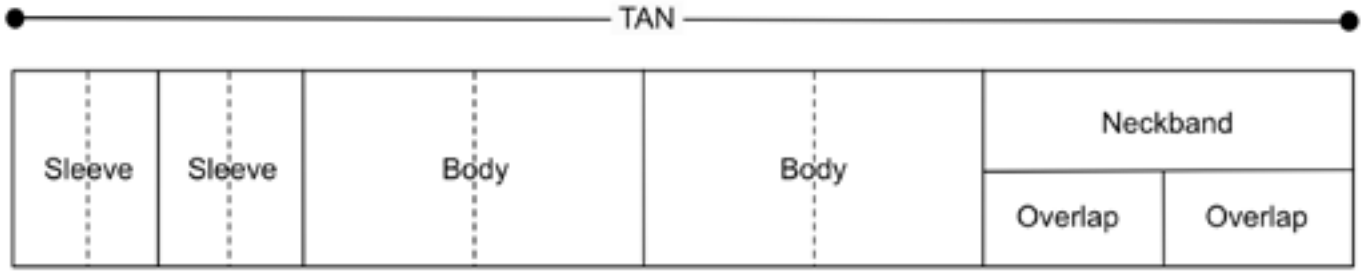
6

Ohi Racecourse Flea Market and **flea markets in general**

Though not specialized in kimono, you can always find the odd stall selling vintage pieces.

Once you have acquired your kimono, it's time to unleash your creativity! For example, you can make bags and clutches out of obi (*Fukuro Obi* work best), or little pouches and coin purses out of kimono fabric.

I'm predominantly a garment sewist, and I approach my kimono refashioning with a zero-waste approach. However, this doesn't mean zero waste is the one and only way. I just happen to believe this is the best way to preserve the integrity of the kimono while also paying homage to the nature of the original garment, as kimono itself uses a zero-waste design. In some cases, like this one, it may be impossible to implement a zero-waste approach due to, for example, moth holes. If that's the case, you can treat your kimono as a piece of fabric and just lay your pattern pieces on top, trying to dodge the holes and the spots. Even in this case, I recommend taking the kimono apart, washing it, and reassembling it as it was when it was a bolt.



A tan, kimono fabric bolt. The entire bold is used to make a kimono, and excess fabric is tucked into the seaming allowance.

Here I'm going to show step by step how I take apart a kimono. I'm assuming that readers already have some preexisting sewing knowledge, but if you don't have any, this is the perfect occasion to start researching!

What you'll need:

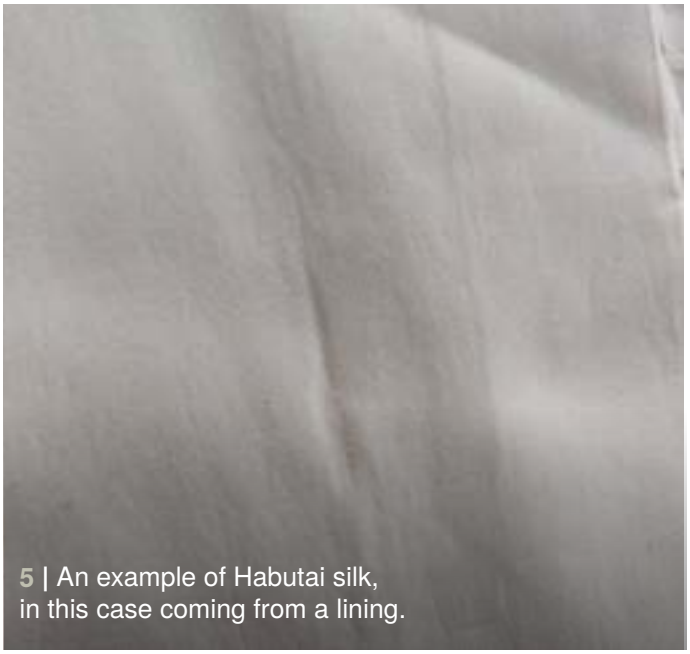
- A large bucket or an *ofuro* (bath)
- Baking soda
- Thread snips and a seam ripper
- A sewing machine and/ or hand sewing equipment
- Lots of patience!

Taking apart a kimono is a slow process, so put on that program you were meaning to watch or play some music in the background. Carefully snip the thread and rip the stitches, being mindful not to poke a hole in the fabric. Start from the sleeves and collar and work your way down, until you end up with a bunch of rectangular strips of fabric.

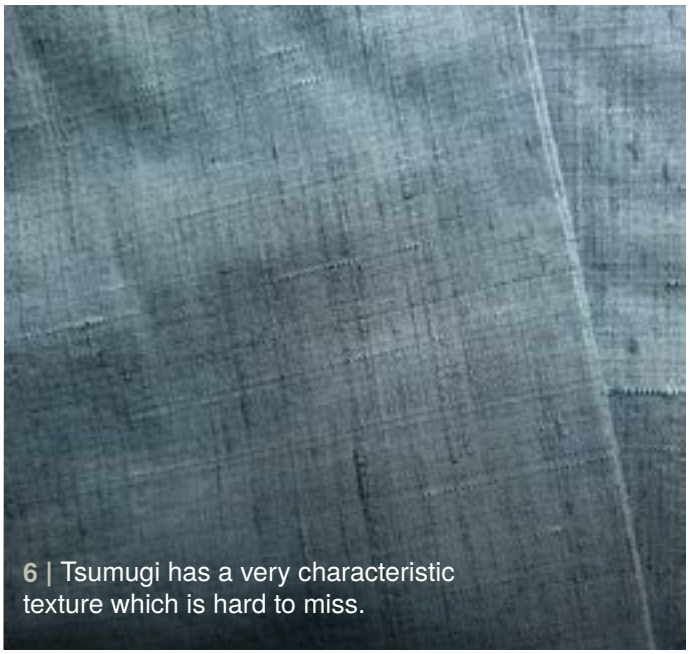
1 | Start from the sleeves. **2** | Carefully cut or rip seams. Kimono are delicately hand stitched so ripping the seams should not be difficult. **3** | An example of side seam. This stitching technique is called “Unshin”. **4** | Voilà!

Please keep in mind that if your kimono is *Awase* (lined kimono), you must separate the lining from the outer fabric and treat them as two separate garments. This is particularly important if the colors are very different, for example, a light kimono with red *beni* (a type of vegetable dye which gives a vibrant scarlet) lining, as they may stain one another.

If you have glanced at a kimono store at least once you may have noticed there are different types of fabrics available, from soft *habutai*(plain weave silk which takes dyeing exceptionally well) to nubby *tsumugi* (silk originally woven from the waste of cocoons).



5 | An example of Habutai silk, in this case coming from a lining.



6 | Tsumugi has a very characteristic texture which is hard to miss.

Sewing graphics from freepik.com

As with garment sewing in general, you'll have to match your project to your fabric. For example, soft linings make nice blouses, whereas *Oshima Tsumugi* (a type of tightly woven Tsumugi from Kyushu, resist-dyed in mud) is a good fit for a coat.

Now, on to washing. If you are making garments out of the kimono, I recommend measuring every piece before and after washing in order, to assess shrinkage. This is particularly relevant if you intend to implement a zero-waste approach, but important in any project which will be washed regularly, so be careful and plan accordingly if that's the case.

To wash, immerse the lot in the bucket of lukewarm water with baking soda (to prevent excessive color transfer) and a delicate laundry soap. I use all-natural Aleppo soap from Tokyu Hands, but Ecover, Pax, Naturon and Sarasa are good surfactant-free options available on Amazon. Leave for about 10 minutes and then rinse in water without twisting your fabric, as silk loses its strength when wet. I like to repeat the rinsing (with no soap this time) process a few times until the water runs clear.

Please keep in mind that not all kimono fabrics take washing well. Any kimono painted in Yūzen, (a multicolored resist paint style) for example, will lose the paint or, worse, have the paint bleed on the surrounding area. An example of Yūzen kimono is this *kurotomesode* (the most formal kimono worn by married women, black with a motif painted on the bottom). Dry clean those instead. After washing, line dry and iron your pieces while still damp with no steam.

Because you end up with several long strips of fabric, one option is to reassemble them into a top or a jacket. Dresses are also another popular option, especially when you can use the entirety of the kimono, for example by adding rectangle after rectangle to your desired length. If you are not a fan of the loose look, you can easily add a casing to cinch the waist. If many stains are present and the kimono is light in color, you can use an oxygen cleaner, alcohol and a toothbrush to clean it by brushing not too vigorously, being careful to dry between attempts. Benzine works for oily stains such as makeup on every color, but it's mildly toxic so use a mask and ventilate your room while using it.

7 | an example of blouse with casing made of handwoven silk

8 | household items are a popular option for remake, such as this oven mitt made with a scrap of Kasuri (another type of resist dye) from Okinawa (top) and in cotton dobby (bottom).

Now that your kimono is ready to be repurposed, use your imagination to create something new! There is no shortage of online resources on the matter, not to mention countless books such as the “New way of kimono remake” (新きものリメイク術), which I recommend mostly because it features an explanation of the different kimono weaves which can be very interesting and useful to the neophyte. One of my favorite ways to seek inspiration is to look on Pinterest, for example searching for 着物リメイク (“kimono remake”). You are not likely to be disappointed!

I hope this guide was useful to you all. I wish you a life filled with beautiful kimono.

Emilia is a trained scientist but enjoys making all the things in her free time. Despite her predominant hobby being sewing, she also likes to make furniture, play the shamisen, cook, and grow an out-of-control number of plants. If you want to know more about kimono remake, and sewing in general, you can follow her on Instagram @emilia_to_nuno and her blog emiliatonuno.blog

 Photo: DesignClass on Unsplash.com

MAY RELEASES

Rachel Fagundes (Okayama)

MOVIES

May 1
- Line of Duty (2019)
- Secret × Heroine Phantomirage!: Eiga ni Natte Chodaishimasu (2020)
- All the Things We Never Said (2020)
- On the Street (2020)

May 3
- Kudakechiru Tokoro O Misete Ageru (2020)

May 8
- Ip Man 4: The Finale (2019)
- Anna (2019)
- Queen of Hearts (2019)
- Kaili Blues (2015)

May 15
- Luce (2019)
- Eizouken ni wa Te wo Dasu na! (2020)

May 22
- Good Boys (2019)
- Psychomagie, un art pour guérir (2019)
- Baragaki: Unbroken Samurai (2020)

23 May
- Monster SeaFood Wars (2020)

May 26
- Rumble: The Indians Who Rocked The World (2017)

May 29
- The Wild Goose Lake (2019)
- Grand Blue (2020)
- Hokusai (2020)

May 30
- Dovlatov (2018)

Sources:
https://www.imdb.com/calendar/?region=jp
https://www.vg247.com/2020/02/18/video-game-release-dates-2020/

GAMES

May 5
- Someday You'll Return (PC)

May 13
- Deep Rock Galactic – official launch (PC, Xbox One)

May 14
- Signs of the Sojourner (PC)
- Ion Fury (PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

May 15
- Hatsune Miku: Project Diva Mega Mix (Switch)

May 19
- The Wonderful 101: Remastered (PC, PS4, Switch)

May 20
- Crucible (PC)

May 22
- Maneater (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Saints Row The Third Remastered (PC, PS4, Xbox One)

May 26
- Mortal Kombat 11: Aftermath expansion (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, Stadia)
- Minecraft: Dungeons (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

May 27
- For the Warp – Steam Early Access (PC)

May 28
- Those Who Remain (PC, PS4, Xbox One)

May 29
- Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition (Switch)
- XCOM 2 Collection (Switch)
- Borderlands Legendary Collection (Switch)
- BioShock: The Collection (Switch)
- Fast & Furious: Crossroads (PC, PS4, Xbox One)

Bobby Coutu (Okayama) | Rachel Fagundes (Okayama)

MAKING VIDEOS IN JAPAN

Interview with a YouTube Creative

Q: Tell me about your YouTube channel, Q2 Japan! What kind of content do you make?

In a nutshell, my channel is filled with all kinds of content about life and culture in Japan. Whether it be about festivals, martial artists, katana artisans, *izakaya* owners—if it's related to Japan, I'll show it. I have no CGI skills and I do most of the production by myself, so a lot of the videos are short, 5-10 minute interviews. But my channel has no absolute style, so I like to try new ways of recording and editing. For example, I've made a few cooking videos with expat friends where they share recipes from their respective cultures. Other videos are more instructional, where I try to inform the audience about IC cards or ESL in Japan. If anyone out there wants me to try something or wants to collaborate, I'm always open to these creative ventures.

Q: How did you get started making videos?

My first video was in October of 2018. I started off making travel vlogs on my channel, mainly as a way to practice my video production skills. I had been doing professional photography for about a year and a half and upon a friend's suggestion, I took up videography after moving to Okayama in September of 2018 (so my first video was soon after that). YouTube just seemed like a practical outlet for experience.

Q: Tell me about the process of making a video.

Pre-production is often the biggest pain in the butt when it comes to video making. This is where I typically start contacting people about a video idea (because most of my videos are documentary style). If I already know someone who fits the bill for an interview (e.g., I want to interview a calligrapher and happen to know an excellent calligrapher), that's amazing. But half the time, I have an idea but no real leads. So I ask a bunch of my friends if they know anyone or know anyone who knows anyone, etc. . . . Some projects build up speed quickly and others fizzle within days. That's why it's important to write down your ideas and to keep trying as many as possible.

Production is where I'm actually going out to the shoot location and recording video. This is usually the most stressful part, but also the most insightful. You learn a lot from going to various locations, meeting people, and listening to their stories. I always forget something (whether it's a camera setting or spare batteries), so it can get stressful. But that's a part of usually working as a one-man crew.

Post-production is actually my favorite part of video making. It's where you collect everything you've worked so hard to record and cut it up into something that's entertaining. It's tempting to render out a video and upload right away, but I've learned over the years that there's no rush, so just take your time and make a few drafts.

Q: How have you taught yourself to improve your videos over the years?

A lot of trial and error will go a long way toward improvement. I always try to listen to people's comments and suggestions, even if it hurts. If video making is something you're serious about, you just have to be willing to get your ego hurt. I also use YouTube tutorials a lot for editing and shooting tips. We live in an amazing time for shared information!

A few specific things I needed to improve at the beginning were:

- shooting at appropriate frame rates and shutter speed
- understanding camera movement
- improving audio quality
- learning the basics of linear editing

There's a whole laundry list of skills that I'm still working on, but if you aspire to be a creator, you'll quickly find that you need to have a wide set of skills. You will inevitably miss certain things, like setting the white balance or double-checking your batteries, but that's ok. You have to roll with the punches and ask for help when you can get it in order to maximize the quality of what you produce.

Q: What equipment do you bring to a shoot?

I've continued to use my Nikon D5500 for a lot of my projects. I've had it for about four years now and it's somehow continued to shoot solid photos and videos. I did upgrade last summer to the Panasonic GH5s, but I still use the Nikon as my B-camera.

Like many photographers, I just accumulated a lot of gear over time. Here's a list of typical gear I bring to my YouTube shoots now with: Panasonic GH5s, Nikon D5500, 2 tripods, drone (Mavic Air), gimbal (Weebill S), GoPro Hero 5, 2 Zoom H1 audio recorders, 2 lapel mics, back up batteries, and memory cards.

Q: What's the most unexpected thing that's happened while shooting a video?

The most unexpected thing that happened was that my very first drone crashed on it's sixth ever flight. I almost had a panic attack because if anyone had been close to me they could have gotten hurt. Luckily no one did and nothing was damaged (except my drone). Later I found out that that specific model had been recalled in the U.S. months before. Pick your drones wisely (DJI usually make good ones).

Q: How do you go about structuring a narrative to a video?

I usually have a vague idea about how to start and finish a video, but you really have to just shoot and see what happens on the editing room floor. It's similar to cooking, in that sometimes you don't always have the ingredients you'd like, but ya gotta make something! And sometimes those limitations can help you craft something even better than you originally imagined. I do recommend being flexible and taking your time with shooting videos though.

At the beginning, I had no idea what I was doing so there was absolutely no storyboard in my head. I would visit a place like a Sake Festival or a small town in Okayama and do almost no research on it (do NOT do this). People want to see a narrative structure in videos. It can be as simple as, “Hop on the train to the beach, enjoy the beach, go home.” But if your video is missing certain narrative elements like place, time, action, it’s just chaotic and boring. If you’re interested in doing travel vlogs, I recommend you look into why someone would want to watch your channel. Is it to be informed of logistical considerations? Are you an entertaining person? The reason I stopped doing travel videos is because I can’t really do justice to the area I’m visiting by shooting a poorly planned, spontaneous video. If I’m going to promote a place, I want to make sure I do a solid job of it, spending days on shooting the way I imagine the area to be.

Q: Why do you think people are so interested in Japan? Why aren’t there as many people making videos about living abroad in Italy, Mexico, or India?

I have a feeling most visitors like the accessible exoticism of Japan. It’s rather safe and clean here, all the while being quite different from Western societies. Japan’s got a lot of interesting traditions that have continued as parts of everyday life (albeit sometimes in modernized forms). From martial arts to tea ceremonies, calligraphy, music, and festivals, a lot of people around the world would like to know more.

Anime may be another factor, but I think fans of Japanese media are only a subgroup of people interested in Japan.

Q: What has been your favorite video you've made and why?

My favorite videos are probably the ones on karate, *wagashi**, and *iaido***. All of these videos are in the typical short interview style. It felt rewarding to make these videos and I have lasting good memories of the people I talked to. The karate one was just a cool opportunity to visit a kids' dojo and I was really happy with some of the action shots. For the wagashi video, I just love the family that I interviewed. The Kaji family are sweet people and I try to visit them at least once a month to just chat. I usually become friends with the people I interview, but they're by far the closest friends I've made from my YouTube channel. And in terms of the iaido video, it's my most viewed video and I learned a lot about shooting and editing for that one. It was the first video I made that I was truly proud of.

Q: What is the most fun aspect of making a YouTube video?

I'd say that meeting new people and having a body of work are the two most rewarding parts of making YouTube videos. It's a lot of work but you never know how many people you may reach. At the end of the day, if people watch your content, you feel validation. It's unfortunate, but the number of views, likes, and subscribers you get can impact how positively you feel about your channel. So it's important not to get too caught up in trying to be online famous. Remember that the tangible relationships you build with people through collaborating with them are not only real, but enriching. Through my channel, I've been able to meet jewelers, calligraphers, priests, ramen chefs, people from all walks of life. Remembering these great people helps me keep going. Also, make sure to look at your channel library and take in all the videos you've been able to create. That catalogue is there to remind you that you made those with your creativity.

Q: What is something that you struggle with about this art form?

Getting permission to shoot in Japan can be tough, especially if you introduce yourself as a YouTuber or videographer. Japanese people typically trust broadcasters like NHK, OHK, RSK, but not freelancers. So having a bit of fame would be nice, just to get a foot in the door more easily.

*Japanese confections
**The martial art of using a katana

Q: How has being Japanese American, and fluent in Japanese, affected your videos?

There's always a positive and a negative outlook on a situation, so I try to keep that in mind when working on a project. For example, being mixed Japanese, my identity and language abilities are a bit ambiguous for many Japanese people. If I were white, blonde, and spoke little Japanese, I would fit into a stereotype that might help me get into typically difficult shooting locations (i.e., being the Token White Guy). But my unique identity can also help in understanding people and building relationships, which can ultimately improve the quality of my narratives.

Q: Do you consider your videos to be entertainment, education, art, or all of the above?

I think all of the above. You have to make educational material that's enticing, otherwise people lose interest within a minute. Just look at some of the most popular TikTok or (old) Vine videos. Most of them are shot on smartphones and have poor lighting, but they're entertaining and short. My personal goal as a videographer is to create thought-provoking content that is also visually pleasing. But the longer the content, the more difficult it is to keep viewers' attention. So the more I make videos, the more I focus on lighting, cinematography, and capturing beautiful images.

Q: Can you talk a bit about the financial side of making YouTube videos?

So I've been eligible for monetization for about four months now. It took me a few years to get there, but here's the basic breakdown.

You need at least 1,000 subscribers and at least 4,000 watch hours within a 365 day period. The watch hours was the killer. It was very difficult to get past that hurdle, but I was somehow able to do it thanks to the popularity of the iaido video, as well as the kendo and sword artisan videos.

To this day I've made 56 public videos and about a whopping $30 total from monetization. You really need to be getting hundreds of thousands of views in order to make a living off of ad-sense alone. That's why a lot of full-time YouTubers use Patreon, accept sponsors, and sell merch.

Q: How has making these videos changed your life or your experience of Japan?

I think that making videos has allowed me to meet more people than I ever could have met through teaching or other 9 to 5 professions. I have to take the initiative, do the research, and reach out to these people. So if it wasn't for the specific goal of making a video I'd never get to know these individuals and their passions.

Q: What future projects do you have coming up?

Some immediate projects are videos on DNA and Japanese identity, Safe Sex in Japan, and Renting Apartments in Japan. A long term project I'm working on will be about the Nagashima Aiseien, a former leprosarium in Setouchi City. From the 1930s to the 1990s, there were leprosariums (leprosy concentration camps) throughout Japan. There was and still is a large stigma towards people with Hansen's Disease and thousands of Japanese citizens were rounded up throughout the decades and sent to islands to live out the rest of their lives isolated from society. Some of the surviving residents of the Nagashima Aiseien (in Okayama) have agreed to make a year-long documentary with me. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the project is on stand-by.

Bobby Coutu is a freelance photographer/videographer living in Okayama, Japan. He has been in Okayama for almost three years now and has had the opportunity to meet people from all walks of life here. Whether they be politicians, artisans, martial artists, or educators, all the people he meets have something to share (albeit with a bit of coaxing). His YouTube channel focuses on life in Japan and the deep traditions that provide the foundation of Japanese identity. If you have any interest in videography or helping him out in any projects, please let him know! You can contact Bobby via Instagram @q2japan, visit his Youtube Channel, or check out his Patreon Page.

*Japanese confections
**The martial art of using a katana

Viwe Siwisa

To say I was panic-stricken on the night of our debut is a gross understatement. I had invited all of my friends, my chosen family, and of course there were all the unfamiliar faces. The small coffee house venue was packed. I could feel my heartbeat in my head and my head throb in my stomach. The waves of nausea were coming at me fast and strong. Even though I had the support of two amazing musicians and we had practiced until we couldn't anymore, I felt incredibly underprepared. I still don't know what it was that propelled me to get up there, open my mouth and sing—but I did.

I grew up in a family that has an unwavering adoration for music, and where there was music—there was the Siwisa family. My folks exposed us to the infinite world of rhythm, melody, and harmony. From as far back as I can remember our home was filled with the most beautiful and eclectic music. The family favourites ranged from Miriam Makeba, Tania Maria, and Kate Bush, to Chick Corea, Salif Keita, and Massive Attack. We travelled far and wide for musical experiences, sometimes bundling into the car for 8-hour road trips to music festivals in distant parts of South Africa. They wanted us to share their passion.

I grew up playing the clarinet in school and later learned the piano in very structured, somewhat solitary environments. It was always an unspoken dream of mine to participate in jams, play in a band and get up in front of people and share music. But often crippled by my self-consciousness, I never felt like that was something I could accomplish.

But there's a sense of freedom that comes with leaving the familiar and going to a place where no one knows you. You can release yourself from your self-imposed restrictions of who you can be. And it's with that mentality that I approached my move to Japan. It was a chance for me to reinvent myself away from the gaze of people who thought they knew me. It was a chance for me to confront my fears and get up onto that stage like I had always desired.

When I finally arrived in my lush countryside town in Fukui Prefecture, it didn't take long for me to find fellow ALTs with a love and talent for music. But it was a chance meeting with an enigma of a man that really opened me up to the world of music in Fukui.

Meeting Yagi Ryuichi-kun was quite the experience in itself. He is by far one of the most unaffected, spirit-like human beings I've ever met in my life. After a set he played with his funk-soul band at a local venue, he drunkenly stumbled over to me. Before even introducing himself he asked me, "Can you sing?" Well, I didn't really know how to answer that. I had never sung for anyone other than myself before. I decided to tell him that I love music enough to be open to anything he was about to propose. So when he asked me if I'd be interested in singing in a new band he wanted to start, I didn't bat an eyelid. This was my chance to prove to myself that I could do what I had always secretly aspired to do.

Yagi introduced me to an über cool guitarist and jazz café owner, Ishimori Hisao. Ishimori san is an incredibly seasoned, jazz-inclined guitarist. He has a wealth of musical knowledge and the ability to take complex ideas and break them down into palatable, bite-sized chunks for anyone to consume. We immediately had a natural rapport and after a three-man jam session, it was clear that we had the makings of a solid trio. With Yagi's rhythm guitar and funky backing vocals, Ishimori san's silky and jazzy lead guitar and my sweet, yet cool and unaffected lead vocals, we started to compose our own music. We took all of our favourite aspects of music, threw them into a hat and created Umm..., a soul, blues, and world beat fusion band.

Our trio got together weekly for about seven months with the intention of composing and perfecting enough music for a complete set. We wanted to organise a gig. More than just composing for our personal enjoyment, we wanted other people to tap into our hearts, and we needed an opportunity to gauge whether what we were doing was something that people would want to be a part of. This bit scared me the most. But confronting my anxieties about performing was the exact reason I jumped onto this bandwagon.

So that's how I ended up on stage that first opening night. Clutching the mic, terrified but backed up by my friends, I began to sing.

I wish I could say everyone became invisible and I somehow navigated my way into "the zone," but that's not at all what happened. Instead, I was hyper aware of every single note I sang, every little expression on the faces of the audience, and it was making me increasingly self-conscious. I was trying to control my shaking voice, which of course made it shake even more. I was sinking, and critically analysing every little thing I was doing in that moment was not quelling my anxiety. And so it was to be an unsuccessful first performance on my part. But thank god for Yagi and Ishimori san, who kept me sounding passable all the way through. My friends were kind; they all congratulated us and complimented my performance. I had tanked, and even though I was beating myself up about it, I felt a rush of excitement from what I had just done. I felt like if I could just overcome my apprehensions, this was something I could become comfortable with and even come to do well.

After our debut, we knew we wanted to expand the range of our sound and invite more creative energy into the group. It was then that Iggy Jeffery, a good friend and fellow ALT, joined us as our drummer. With his keen ability for creating nuanced rhythms and his enviable ear for music, he was just what we needed to add that much-coveted groove. And to compliment him in the rhythm section, James Ueki, a friend of Ishimori and member of a local rock band, joined as our bassist. James' cool, nonchalant riffs imbued Umm... with the soul-punching bass we needed to round out our sound.

This meant Umm... graduated to a quintet and we were better for it. But it also meant dealing with more ideas and creative differences. As much as our musical tastes overlap, we all have different musical backgrounds. I'm a classically trained musician, Yagi is a self taught guitarist and lover of all things funk, Ishimori is a jazz virtuoso, Iggy is a cross-genre self taught drummer, and James a well studied bassist with funk and rock roots. We're also a very diverse age range, with the youngest member being 28 and the oldest being 55. These factors inform the way we approach writing and how we generate ideas. It's also these differences, when we learned how to navigate them, that helped contribute to our somewhat nostalgic, feel-good sound that most people seem to be able to relate to.

We may have started off as a band steeped in blues traditions with our often melancholy songs, but with a deep love of so many other types of music, we found it limiting to restrict ourselves to one genre. We've now learned to take our strengths and create a more diverse sound. Ishimori san's strong jazz roots mean that a lot of our harmonic structures are heavily influenced by jazz. Iggy's dextrous drumming allows us to experiment with anything from hip-hop to latin grooves. With Yagi's funk roots and Ueki's funk-rock roots, we've started creating more up-tempo music. And my fondness for soul, jazz, and blues, informs our melodic choices. And, somehow it all gels to create warm, soul soothing music.

Our shared love of music also somehow transcended the language barrier. Iggy and I speak English and embarrassingly broken Japanese, whilst Yagi, Ishimori and Ueki speak Japanese and varying degrees of English. In some respects that makes the song writing process a bit challenging. But it also makes it all the more interesting. We've found ways to work around, what is now a minor obstacle. As a group, we don't have one approach when it comes to songwriting and any member is welcomed and encouraged to bring their ideas to the table.

Sometimes we jam and a song appears out of the ashes. Other times we'll write a complete song individually and direct where the other members fit in. And other times a member will bring an incomplete idea to the table and we all collaborate to complete it. This is how we've learned to overcome the language hurdle and even when we don't have the words to express what we want to say, we can just play or notate it. That's the undeniable charm of music.

In the last year since our first gig, we've had countless opportunities to get up on stages, whether it's at live music clubs, markets, local music events, and mini festivals. And each time is so different. We have times when we absolutely crush the performance and feel like we're elevating. And we have times when we let ourselves down. But each time is a personal achievement. Each time, we have lessons to learn. And each time I witness myself confronting spaces and audiences I never thought myself capable of confronting. I often wonder who I am and when I became this person. It's a very satisfying feeling knowing that I've been able to coax myself out of my self-consciousness and do things I've always wanted to do.

Coming here, I never imagined that I'd find my tribe. But the community I've found through music has helped me grow in immeasurable ways. I've met people and been in spaces I probably never would have been exposed to were it not for music. The connections I've made with other expats and the locals are so deep, true, and, I'm certain, everlasting. The experiences I've had will forever remain imprinted in me. I'm not sure how much time I have left in this country, but I can honestly say I feel like I've LIVED, in Japan. And that can largely be attributed to music.

Viwe Siwisa is a fourth-year South African JET residing in Awara City, Fukui Prefecture. She is one-fifth of the soul-blues-world beat fusion band Umm.... You can find them on YouTube and Instagram.

NEW PERSPECTIVE ON AN OLD DRINK

Kelley Kaminsky Shares Fresh Tak

For many people, their first exposure to sake occurs at a sushi bar, usually served warm, in a small carafe, or *tokuri*, and sadly, stops there. An experience that does the drink a great disservice. Sake is far from a one-and-done beverage. Despite its relatively simple ingredient list, it can be brewed into a variety of styles with unique flavor profiles. Sake, more aptly called '*nihonshu*' (lit. Japanese alcohol) has a long history spanning back almost 2000 years making it an important part of Japanese culture. However, in recent decades drops in domestic sales have encouraged breweries to look overseas for new sales opportunities and in turn, hire on new staff to help them tap these markets. Kelley Kaminsky is o such hire and has been working in sales at Nishiya Brewery in Hyogo Prefecture since 2017, helping bring a new passion and understanding to the of overlooked world of sake.

SAKE

Tayler Skultety (Nara)

of Nishiyama Brewery
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Kelley found her current position at the brewery the way many of our peers find jobs in Japan; at the After JET Career Conference in Osaka. “Of all the participating companies they were the only sake brewery listed which intrigued me . . . I came for a brewery tour, did a couple interviews and the rest was history.” Kelley’s first love was beer, her degree in Japanese Studies was plan B, a step away from the world of fermented adult beverages, or so she thought. After moving to the cultural hub of Kyoto where she worked as an ALT for three years, her love of sake developed through visits to local breweries and sake bars. When it came time to leave JET her new job took her to the pristine rice fields of Tamba City in Hyogo, a region famous for sake production.

Nestled in a quiet valley, in the heart of the prefecture, Nishiyama Brewery has been creating premium sake for 171 years. Rice and water, the main ingredients of sake, are abundant and pure here and Nishiyama even grows a portion of their own rice to supply the brewery. This brand of sake is decidedly different from the *futsuushu* or ‘standard sake’ you’re likely to be served at a sushi counter. Nishiyama brews award-winning sake including *ginjo* varieties where the rice is more polished, leaving a starchier grain, resulting in a cleaner, more aromatic product, as well as *junmai* (lit. pure rice) varieties, made without any added alcohol or sugar resulting in deeper flavors.

“There are a wide array of possible flavors and aromas” explains Kelley. “One example of fruit characteristics you may look for in a ginjo sake are green apple, pear, or banana to name a few.” Although sake has its roots in Shinto ceremonies and is often used to celebrate special occasions, she insists quality sake is something that can be enjoyed regularly. Her recommendation is to drink it slightly chilled, not too cold or the flavors can get lost.

Sake is more closely related to beer and wine than to spirits like whiskey or vodka. It’s brewed, not distilled, and has an alcohol content of around 16%, slightly higher than that of wine. In addition to rice and water, fermented rice called *koji*, and sake yeast are used in the brewing process. Nishiyama makes their own koji at the brewery and imports their sake yeast from a long-time business partner in nearby Osaka. “I would say the most crucial part of the [sake making] process is koji-making, it’s so important. It’s also important to have a strong *shubo* (yeast starter)” says Kelley.

In order to better promote the Nishiyama brand to overseas customers, she has gained hands-on experience brewing sake. Kelley was instrumental in the creation of their first new release in 105 years, with the goal of making something completely different from the brewery’s flagship brand of sake. “I chose what yeast I wanted to work with, what variety of rice would pair well with it . . . in one of the sakes I chose to use a lower percentage of overall rice added into *soe-shikomi* (the first of three additions of water, koji, and rice in the four-day brewing process). The goal of this was for the fermentation to start a little more slowly, resulting in a longer fermentation process at lower temperatures to get a beautiful, clean sake. I also used a rice that doesn’t tend to lend a massive amount of umami, to allow the characteristics of the yeast to shine through.” In order to appreciate this new brand of sake, named Yamato Tamba, Kelley recommends focusing on the balance of acidity with the umami from the rice.

In Japan, there are still negative stereotypes surrounding sake; in particular that it's a drink only for the over 60 crowd. But forward-thinking breweries like Nishiyama are trying to change these misconceptions, "We've made efforts to appeal to a younger crowd as well as women" says Kelley, "So while there are certainly middle-aged men drinking our sake, we have a lot of customers in their 30s." Abroad, Nishiyama Brewery believes diverse hiring can bring a deeper knowledge of sake to the English speaking world who may not have much exposure to the drink. Kelley cites her boss, Yashima Kourei, Nishiyama's head brewer or *toji*, saying "He suggested that we bring a new way of thinking to the industry. One of his examples was tasting expressions, or how I describe flavor profiles compared to my Japanese colleagues."

Of course, as with any alcohol, the more you drink, the more you learn. Anyone willing to seek out their own bottle from Nishiyama will not only be rewarded with delicious sake but also a work of art. "The back labels of every bottle of Kotsuzumi (the brewery's flagship brand) have a haiku written on them," explains Kelley. "As for bottles and labels, we owe them to our incredible designer, Hirosuke Watanuki. After studying abroad in Portugal and traveling all over the world, he returned to Japan in 1969 and met our fifth president shortly after."

Overall, Kelley hopes that by increasing understanding of sake, a better universal appreciation of the drink can be achieved, as was her own experience. "I think rather than needing to acquire a taste for it, I just needed to be exposed to actual craft sake, my previous experience with sake was limited to nameless hot or cold options at strip mall sushi joints . . . I'm still discovering what's out there. Now that I have an understanding of what a labor of love it is to make sake, I have an entirely new appreciation for it."

Follow Nishiyama Brewery on Instagram | Or visit their website

Tayler Skultety is the Culture editor at CONNECT. She has been working as an ALT in Nara Prefecture for four years and enjoys drinking sake responsibly while pursuing her writing projects

Kelley Kaminsky is starting her fourth year in the sake industry. In that time she has co-produced a new brand and helped her team brew consecutive gold award-winning daiginjo at the Japan Sake Awards. She enjoys CrossFit, craft beer, and travelling in her free time.

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NISHIYAMA BREWERY

It is garbage day and the house is a mess. Plastic wrappers in all shapes and sizes spill out from plastic bags, plotting their escape. Beside the door leans stacks of cardboard boxes, flattened out of their boxy shapes, neatly tied together with a cord of white paper rope. Some old clothes are tossed haphazardly into a plastic shopping basket. As I gingerly step around the minefield to get into the *ofuro*, I survey the new living room landscape. *I hope someone remembered to put the coffee on.*

I live in the village of Kamikatsu in Tokushima prefecture. With a population of around 1,500 residents, we are the smallest village on all of Shikoku island. But don't let size fool you. Kamikatsu is a little village with a big reputation—not just big in Japan but beyond her borders too. Back in 2003, Kamikatsu became the first municipality in Japan to declare for Zero Waste, a goal they had hoped to reach by 2020. Although falling just short, Kamikatsu's Zero-Waste initiative still sees the village recycle up to 81% annually of their total waste, compared to a national average of only 20%.

What is Zero Waste in Kamikatsu? In practice, it translates into the scene demonstrated regularly by my living room. We don't have a garbage collection service here. All the residents, instead, will clean, then sort (some conscientiously, others more broadly) the waste they generate at home, before bringing it in themselves to the Hibigatani Waste and Resource Station, known simply as the *gomi station*. At the gomi station is where the fun begins.

Currently, at the gomi station we have forty-five different categories of separation, into which each resident will proceed to sort through their own household waste. Contrary to popular belief, this is not nearly as complicated as it may seem. Sure, forty-five categories is a lot, but some of these categories include used tires, bedding or mattresses, and waste oil, things the average person will not find themselves throwing away on a regular basis. What you will find is people most often sorting their waste into the same few categories: plastic (dirty plastic packaging, clean plastic packaging, PET bottles, styrofoam etc.) paper (cardboard, newspapers or fliers, milk cartons etc.)

KAMIKATSU

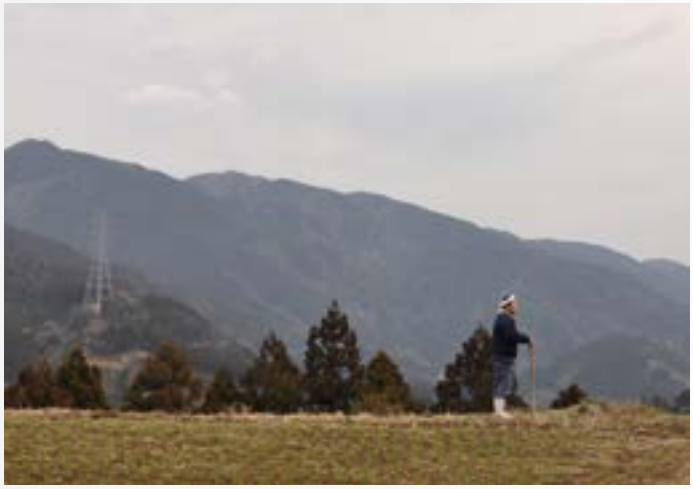
MORE THAN JUST ZERO WASTE

LINDA DING

cans (aluminium cans, steel cans etc.) and glass bottles (brown, clear, other coloured etc.). There are also staff who are always on-site, pointing you in the right direction should your memory, or super sleuth skills, fail.

For any new or still usable items, such as clothing or crockery, there is the *Kuru-Kuru Shop*, a 'reuse store' where residents can leave their cleaned items behind, and anyone else can come in and take the items away for free. *Kurukuru* means circular, and that's exactly what the system feels like. The circulation of items from one neighbour to the next (or anyone for that matter, the taking away of items is not restricted to residents). One man's trash is another's new sake set.

For anyone who has lived, or even just visited, Japan, the ubiquity of plastic here is hard to miss. Some days it seems almost as Japanese as Fuji-san and sakura. Truth be told, the use of packaging is not significantly less in Kamikatsu either. There is no supermarket in the village, there isn't even a combini. Most villagers will drive to the nearest city of Tokushima, about forty minutes away, or to the closer town of Katsuura, to get their essential needs. And almost all of those items will come individually wrapped in packaging of some sort. Even at the local farmer's market here in Kamikatsu, where all of the produce is grown locally by our farmers, you can't escape the plastic packaging that is used to keep items 'safe', 'fresh' and 'more appealing'



for their customers. So why did Zero Waste in Kamikatsu start in the first place? And what has it really achieved?

Back before 2003, Kamikatsu practiced open incineration as their method of waste disposal. This meant that all of the local garbage was thrown into one large hole dug into the ground, where it would be systematically set on fire. Needless to say, this was neither particularly great for the environment nor for human health. When new government regulations shut down the two small incinerators that the village eventually did purchase, it left the town council at a crossroads. There was no budget to build a whole new incinerator, and also it was too costly to ship the village's waste to the next town over. So the decision was made to make less waste in the first place by recycling as much as possible.

Like any change to human habits, the decision to turn Kamikatsu into a zero-waste practicing village met with a lot of resistance at first. It was difficult to make people understand why disposing of their garbage suddenly got so complicated, and even more so to get people to come on board with the

idea. But after change comes acclimation, and eventually cleaning and sorting the garbage just became the new normal. We human beings are nothing if not adaptable, and given time we are quite capable of changing more than we think.

In the process of learning to clean and to separate, something surprising occurred. Waste started to take on a whole new meaning. Instead of automatically throwing away a greasy potato chips bag after finishing its contents, the extra step of cleaning and drying it out makes you look at that bag anew. It's not just 'garbage.' It's a material, an object manufactured using a lot of different resources, sitting in your hand in its (near) original form, before its short stint as a potato chips carrier lowered its status to 'waste'.

In the new 'climate aware' environment of today, we are constantly hearing the words garbage and waste, but what constitutes these things? What is garbage but merely our perception of an object? We have grown up in societies that have taught us mainly to *throw away* anything we deem unnecessary at that moment. Have you ever thrown out leftovers because you couldn't be bothered to carry it around or to put it away properly, only to find yourself suddenly hungry again later and wishing you hadn't wasted that food? When we are conditioned to act a certain way, one break in the usual chain of events can be enough to trigger a whole new thought process, leading to new action being made.

I first set eyes on the mountains of Kamikatsu back in May 2019. I'd lived in Tokyo before, and the fast pace of corporate life back then made me think I would never return to live in Japan again. But the countryside did something different. It told me to breathe, to slow down, to look for the abundance in simpler things. When I realized that Kamikatsu was the most beautiful place I'd ever seen, it made sense that I had to move here. Nearly a year later I still haven't left.

Now when I go back to Canada to visit, or make a trip to Tokyo, or even just pop down to the next village over, it becomes abundantly clear to me how much Kamikatsu's zero-waste practices have left their mark. It feels wrong on my conscience to throw out my food waste alongside my plastics in one container heading for an incinerator. I know now my food scraps can be composted, turned back into food for the earth (and us). I know these plastics can be recycled back into plastic, that these resources don't necessarily have to just disappear. These are considerations I'd never had before, until getting my own hands dirty, so to speak, has shown me how my own perception of what is garbage is part of the problem.

I N O W

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K a m i k a t s u

Though leading the charge, Kamikatsu is not unique in the fight against waste in Japan. Three other municipalities (Oki-cho in Fukuoka, Minamata City in Kumamoto, and Ikaruga-cho in Nara) have also made the Zero Waste Declaration, while some others have not declared zero waste but have implemented zero waste policies. A big barrier against a more widespread implementation of these practices is said to be population, that what can be achieved in a village of 1,500 is not conceivable for a city of 35 million. However, Ikaruga-cho in Nara has a population of approximately 28,000, a considerable jump up from 1,500.

At the end of the day, this isn't just about numbers. We are all human beings, possessed with the same capacities for change. Moreover, we are all human beings living on the same planet. What affects one affects all. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us, things we think we cannot change, the habits we think we absolutely cannot—*no don't make me!*—give up, we actually can, in an instant. Who would have thought we'd ever stop travelling? That we could stop importing food from other faraway lands just so we can have bananas whenever we feel like it? There may just come a day when strict levels of recycling becomes the norm the world over. There may come a day when there will be no need anymore for recycling, because we won't be producing any more 'garbage.' There is no way to know the future, but there is a way to do what feels right in the now.

With the current pandemic still ongoing, things in Kamikatsu have quieted down. We no longer get large tour groups coming through wanting to learn about zero waste. The national and

international media interviews have stopped for now. Our plans for building a camp program, INOW (pronounced *e-no*, meaning "let's go home" in the local dialect) where guests can choose to come stay in Kamikatsu for a duration of one to four weeks, while picking their own itinerary learning from Kamikatsu's local residents, is also on hold. It is okay though. We are in no rush. If there's anything the wise woodblock carver, Osamu Nakamura, fellow traveller and long-time resident of Kamikatsu has taught me, is the value of time. *"To have more time than things to do, that is a luxury indeed."*

So for now, we wait. To see how the world will change itself. In the meantime, surrounded by the company of cedar forests and mountains all around me, the bloom of sakura just starting to fold into tiny green leaves, life in Kamikatsu continues on. Waking up to nature's smile every day, I am reminded that I made the right choice by being here. Home is where the soul sings.

Linda Ding grew up in Canada, but now calls Kamikatsu home. After leaving her corporate finance job in Tokyo, she lived in Canada, then China, while pursuing her love for writing. You can follow some of her writing on her blog, including several pieces inspired by the nature of Kamikatsu. If you are interested in learning more about INOW, please feel free to send her an email, or check out the website regarding the current internship program in Kamikatsu.

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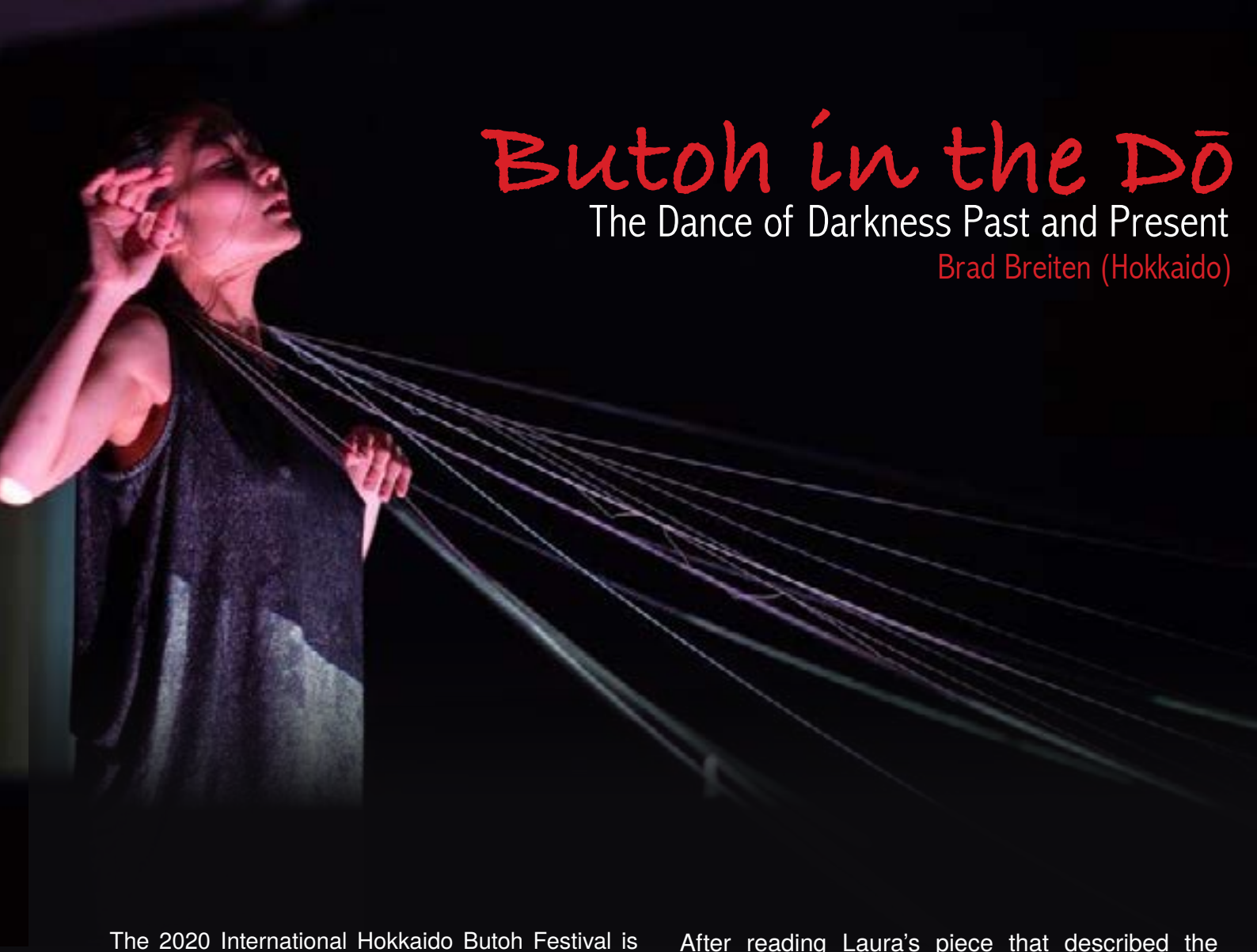


Butoh in the Dō

The Dance of Darkness Past and Present

Brad Breiten (Hokkaido)

The 2020 International Hokkaido Butoh Festival is scheduled to begin May 10, 2020.

Regular *CONNECT* readers may remember in the October, 2019 issue a lovely, dark, and emotional piece by Laura Jones titled "The Enigma of Butoh: Kyoto's Dark Dance." I really loved the piece as it truly captured the wonder that comes from experiencing butoh for the first time (having experienced a similar situation I felt transported back in time reading it). Butoh still seems little-known in Japan, which is surprising given that its history began in Tokyo and has since spread around the world, but that does not mean it is disappearing here. Quite the contrary, in areas all around Japan there have been initiatives to reinvigorate artistic interest in the performance. This can be seen in the opening of spaces primarily for butoh (like the Kyoto Butoh-kan that Laura visited, which was established in 2016), an ever-growing network of dancers and choreographers, and events centered on Butoh and its practitioners.

After reading Laura's piece that described the experience of seeing Butoh, I was compelled to elaborate a little bit more about what it is, and where you can find it.

What is Butoh?

Butoh is an original Japanese dance style that was developed during the post-WWII period. It gained popularity in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The post-WWII period in Japan witnessed an explosion of artists in every medium, pushing the boundaries of what was accepted in literature, art, music, and performance. It was in this period of avant-garde exploration that butoh first found an audience in Tokyo's smoke-filled basement bars.

Butoh, originally called *ankoku butō* (暗黒舞踏), or "the dance of utter darkness," was pioneered by two men: Hijikata Tatsumi (1928-1986) and Ohno Kazuo (1906-2010). The initial butoh performance was a creation by dancer and choreographer Hijikata Tatsumi called *Kinshiki* (禁色), or "Forbidden

All photos provided by Brad Breiten

Colors," in 1959. However, butoh as an articulated and established style developed from collaboration between Hijikata and his contemporary, Ohno Kazuo. Together they created an explicitly Japanese dance style that confronted and transcended both traditional Japanese dance forms and Western dance forms prevalent in Japan at the time.

Since the early 1900s in Japan, Western ideals of beauty in dance had been slowly overtaking traditional Japanese performance aesthetics. These ideals included line, center of gravity, and proportion, as well as theatrical constructions, like the proscenium arch. During the avant-garde art movements of the 1950s, Japanese writers, artists, performers, and choreographers struggled against the Western ideals of beauty that had entered into various artistic forms, from literature to art, as well as theater and dance, and attempted to re-establish a Japanese national, intellectual, and artistic identity. Hijikata claimed that butoh was developed to allow Japanese people to reclaim their artistic identity in the face of ever-increasing Western influences. It was developed in direct opposition to Western style dances (i.e. classical ballet and modern), and also attempted to break with the codification of meaning imbued in traditional Japanese dance vocabularies (i.e. Noh and Kabuki).

Butoh gained considerable momentum from the reactionary attitudes and movement experiments of the *shingeki* (新劇), or "new theater," vanguard of the 1950s. It also draws heavily on the artistic philosophy and ideology of other post-war avant-garde movements. Butoh developed as an underground, revolutionary, and experimental dance style—shrouded in mystery, emphatic of the grotesque, and ever evolving. Because of the philosophical ideals underpinning butoh dance culture, it has found popularity among audiences around the world and has become a renowned performance style with major hubs of activity in countries as far spread as Taiwan, Mexico, Germany, France, and the United States of America.

Today, butoh continues to push the boundaries of performance art. It is often characterized by slow, deliberate movements, and is rooted in a connection to the earth (as opposed to the seemingly weightless and fluid motions standard in classical ballet). Performances are often starkly lit, which provide a dramatic effect either giving the performance an

air of darkness or ethereality. The subject matter of butoh performances, in my experience, has never failed to inspire awe, introspection, and intense conversation. Many artists draw inspiration from personal struggles and lived experiences, and performances I have seen personally have dealt with topics of identity crisis, mental illness, sexuality, death, and afterlife. The movements, inspiration, and setting all coalesce into a performance art style that has, on more than one occasion, left me utterly speechless, if not in tears.

Hokkaido Local Butoh

The International Hokkaido Butoh Festival is the culmination of a short but rich history of butoh in Hokkaido organized by Tanaka Hal and Morishima Hiroshi. Tanaka is a Hokkaido native, and one of the most active butoh choreographers and performers on the island. In an interview with him, he explained to me the history of butoh in Hokkaido.

Butoh first took root in Otaru, Hokkaido in 1975 with the establishment of the Hoppo Butoh-ha (北方舞踏派) headquarters there. They were active in

Hokkaido for seven years before relocating their headquarters to Tokyo. When Hoppo Butoh-ha moved to Tokyo, one member, Kojima Ichiro, stayed behind and took over management of the training center in Otaru. In 1986 he formed the Kobusoku Arutai (古舞族アルタイ) butoh company, and until the mid-90's Otaru was the clear cultural center of butoh in Hokkaido. Around that time Kojima moved his butoh company to Tokyo and one of Arutai's performers, Hata Kanoko, broke off and continued to practice and perform in Sapporo. In the mid-1990's she moved to Taiwan and as Tanaka describes it "butoh disappeared from the island for 10 years."

It wasn't until 2006 that Tanaka returned to Hokkaido and, through a number of solo public performances as well as collaborations with other artists and musicians, breathed new life into the embers of Hokkaido butoh. Seven years ago, he started his specialist butoh lessons at Conte-Sapporo, and through sponsored performances, his Butoh BAR (opportunities to practice and discuss butoh freely with other butoh artists and enthusiasts), and workshops enriched by invited artists and others—as well as the Hokkaido Butoh Festival—butoh has gradually become better known by the people of Hokkaido.

Recent years in Hokkaido have seen an explosion of enthusiasm for butoh. The number of easy-to-find groups, performances, and dancers has increased every year, and much of this has been the effect of the annual Hokkaido Butoh Festival.

2020 International Hokkaido Butoh Festival

The 2020 International Hokkaido Butoh Festival is slated to be a spectacular series of events. In an interview with Morishima and Tanaka, I asked them how they continue to expand the butoh festival year after year, and what kinds of changes they make each time. Morishima spoke to the logistical nature of the festival, learning from mistakes, and aiming to reach more people with an ever-growing number of performers and performances:

> "We learn from what went wrong in previous years and are constantly trying new things. For example, the 2017 Hokkaido Butoh Festival was held in one region, but in 2018 it was held in six cities. In 2019, we exchanged artists in partnership with the Butoh Festival in Taiwan. Now, in 2020, we have invited eight groups from within Japan, partnered with groups in Asia, plan to have an open event at a museum, and will do a multi-day performance event in Iwamizawa."

Tanaka, as the primary dancer and choreographer of the festival, focuses on the expansion of the art through openness, and hopes that by cooperating with other dancers from around the world Hokkaido can become the center of "a vortex that expands outwards into the world." To this end, he and Morishima are excited for this year's outdoor performances, which by their very nature embody the concept of openness.

While butoh has continued to expand and be popular overseas, Tanaka seems particularly excited to bring the beauty and the power of butoh to those here in Japan. He says:

> “Many people in foreign countries are attracted to butoh, but why does it seem like so few Japanese people are interested in dance? In Japanese this is called “darkness under the lighthouse” (灯台下暗し). The term “darkness under the lighthouse” is a saying that means that you can notice things that are far away, but you can’t notice things that are so close you’re standing on them. By importing the cultural values born in Japan from overseas, I want as many people as possible to learn about Butoh. Butoh is something that every human has in them. I want them to notice that. While butoh is a dark abyss of a world, it also has unique and playful facets. This is something that every human has, and I want more people to understand these characteristics of butoh.”

Schedules and information for the 2020 International Hokkaido Butoh Festival and the Hokkaido Butoh Festival Archives can be found at the links below. English-speaking volunteers are available for anyone with questions pertaining to butoh or the festival and concerns about using Japanese. With Covid-19 cases continuing to rise both at home and abroad, many artists have been forced to cancel their participation in this year’s butoh festival. As of writing this article, the organizers are hoping to be able to give their performances starting next month, but any changes or cancelations in the schedule will be posted to their website and Facebook page. With the current state of affairs many of you will not be able to make it to this year’s butoh festival, but I sincerely hope that you will seek out this dark and wonderful expression of humanity on your own, and experience a piece of Japanese (and now world) culture that crosses language and cultural barriers to reach directly to our hearts.

Resources

2020 Butoh Festival Information
Butoh festival homepage and archives
2018 Butoh Festival in Review

Brad Breiten is a fourth-year JET, first-year CIR, placed in Iwamizawa, Hokkaido. His MA degree in Asian Languages and Literatures focused on dance and performance art in its many wonderful variations in Japanese culture. Since arriving in Hokkaido, he has been an active supporter of Hokkaido butoh by attending performances and festivals, dancing, and helping to organize events. When not working or reading about Japanese dance, Brad can be found Latin dancing, doing judo/BJJ, rock climbing, taking photographs, cooking, and crafting.

From Pen to Plane to Projects

An interview with an Australian concept artist living in Japan

Stephanie Lee (Tokyo) | Natalie Andrews (Tokyo)

Recently, I had the chance to chat with Stephanie Lee, an Australian who now lives and works in Japan as a concept artist for a gaming company! Have a glimpse into her background and find out how she got where she is now in the following interview.

When did your interest in concept designing begin?

My interest began in my childhood because I loved drawing and playing games, especially Pokemon! I loved drawing different Pokemon and even creating my own. As I grew older, my interest in games expanded to other genres and titles and I found out there's a job position in game development called "Concept Artist" where you get to draw and design characters for different games! I thought this sounded like the perfect job for me!

How did you find a job in Japan?

After I graduated university, I was introduced to the people at IGDA (International Game Developers Association) Japan, where they let me tour a few game studios in Tokyo. One of these studios was interested in my portfolio, told me to apply and thankfully they decided to hire me!

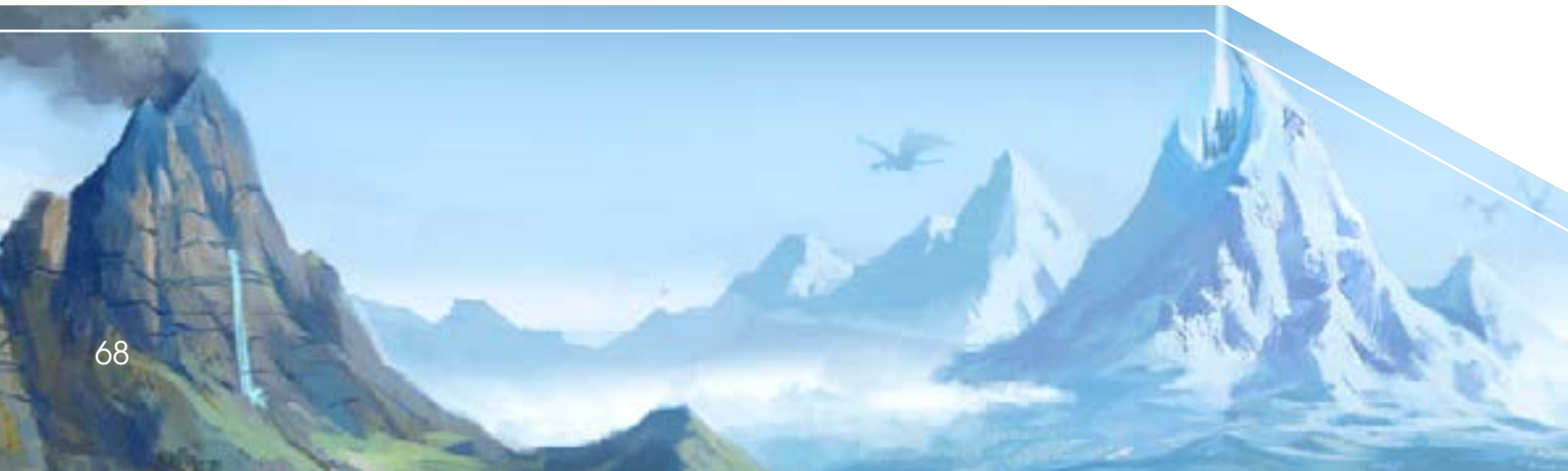
What kind of games does your company create? Is their aesthetic different from your personal style; if so, how have you had to adapt your style to their requirements?
My current company specialises in action games, but I can't say any more than that.

I did most of my training and studying based on what Western companies would be looking for in a portfolio, so coming to Japan I did have to adapt and change my style and colour palette. For example, currently, the trend in Western AAA games (high-end consumer games) is focusing on hyperrealism, with popular genres being post-apocalyptic and open-world. This tends to create a more dull and dark colour palette. Whereas on the other hand, I think Japan has its own unique aesthetic and focuses more on stylistic beauty rather than realism, so Japanese companies are also open to a more variety of styles (like anime or using cell-shading).

I like to think my specialty is being able to adapt to a lot of styles fairly easily, so I think it's a fun challenge.

How do you approach your projects? What comes first in your design process? It depends on the task. Whether it's illustration or concept design, my approach will be slightly different but generally speaking, either way, I'll start with doing a ton of research and collecting my visual references. Once I've collected enough information, I start to put my ideas down. I would have to do a few variations and this is usually when I would get my process checked by a superior, who would guide me to the most suitable iteration.

Any difficulties you've faced that you think are unique to the Japanese entertainment/game design industry? I've actually never worked outside of the Japanese industry, though I am interested in experiencing what it would like working in other countries. The most obvious difficulties for me would be overcoming the language barrier and cultural differences. The very beginning was hard for me as people here would act and react quite differently to the way I am used to back home in Australia. I would say it took me a full year to finally be comfortable with working in Japan and understand the cultural differences.



Which out of all of your projects are you most proud of? I'm proud of most of the projects I've worked on, some pretty big titles! However, unfortunately, due to NDA I can't disclose what projects I've worked on.

Has your perspective on your work changed during your time here in Japan? It made me realise how much harder game development and design actually is, and a lot of the job heavily relies on your communication skills. But I think that's what everyone learns at their first real job in the industry!

So, you've done freelance projects in the past! How did you source these? When I did freelance, most of the jobs I found were through personal and professional connections and maintaining an online presence. With connections, for example, some of my artist friends would be too busy or had been offered a gig that didn't really suit their style. Sometimes they would pass it on to me, and I also do the same when it happens to me.

What advice would you have for anyone looking to explore concept designing for the game industry in Japan? Nowadays, entering the game industry seems to be becoming more accessible since the industry is growing bigger. Nonetheless, I would prioritise polishing your portfolio, understanding what your desired company is looking for, and making yourself known amongst the game developer circles by networking!

Stephanie Lee is an Australian illustrator and concept artist currently working at a game studio in Tokyo. Her specialty is being able to flexibly adapt to a wide range of art styles and she is currently enjoying the challenge of creating work for realism-based to anime-style projects.

Instagram | *All images owned and provided by Stephanie Lee

Kyle Yukawa (Nagasaki Prefecture)

Pretty Girls and Flowers

My whole life I have lived with the fact that I will always be an outsider in some regard. Growing up in rural Appalachia as a mixed Japanese-American, I often battled with my identity. I struggled with how I wanted to project myself to others. I had a lot of cringy phases but hey, it's all part of the process, right? This idea of identity was so important to me that it became the driving force behind my decision to move to Japan long term.

Growing up, I would often visit Nagasaki Prefecture with my father to see relatives. I lived in Nagasaki during high school and then visited when I was at university in Osaka. When applying to the JET Program, I barely mentioned Nagasaki in hopes of living in a new part of Japan. However, it was a huge forehead smacking "of course" moment when I received my placement. I was placed in . . . you got it, Nagasaki. Isn't it crazy how things like that pan out? My family called it fate, but I called it bad karma.

Moving back to Nagasaki as an ALT was bittersweet. Things were familiar, yet different. I was no longer a Japanese student who happened to be *hafu*, but now a foreign ALT who was supposed to introduce the Japanese to a foreign culture and language. Moving to Nagasaki a second time was a turning point for me and my self-expression.

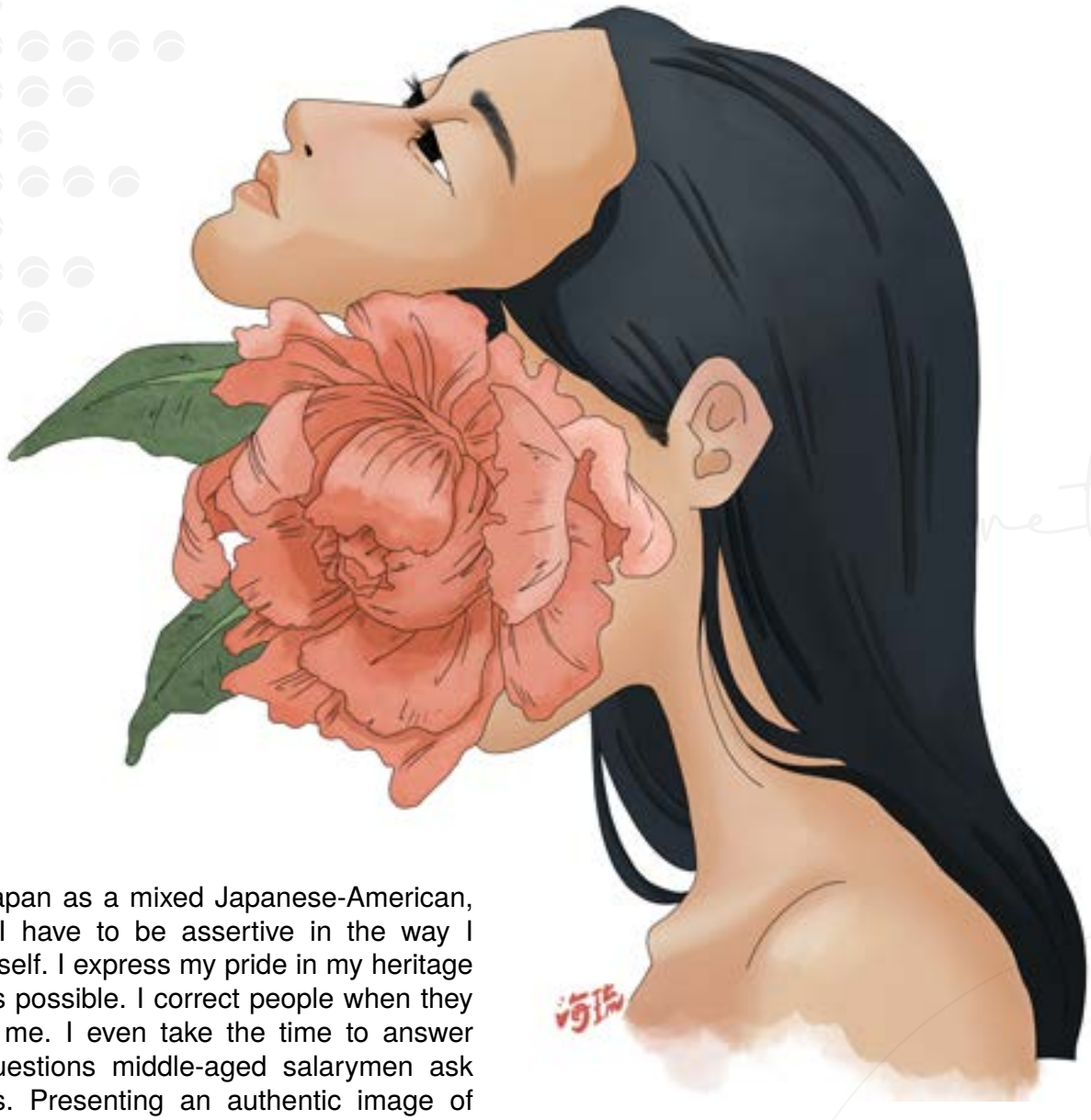
Being an ALT allows for a lot of craft projects: English boards, farewell cards, PowerPoint presentations, and even blackboard art for your students. Before moving to Japan for the JET Program, I didn't put a lot of time into my art. That started to change gradually during my time as an ALT. Going into my fifth year this summer, I find myself truly enjoying my work as an English teacher when I am utilizing art in some way. The pictures I draw here are met with so much more appreciation than when I lived in the West. This appreciation is refreshing and pushes me to improve my skills as an artist.

I was able to connect with my students through art as well. During my free time after lunch I go into their rooms and draw pictures with them. This has even been a conversation starter for me with my teachers and students. I feel so lucky to have this artistic gift that allows me to connect with others even though I'm considered a "foreign teacher."

Gradually, I've been able to come to terms with my identity. Seeing other artists on Instagram express themselves and their culture unapologetically really inspires me to do the same. After a while, I decided that I no longer cared what other people thought. I am me, and if someone has a problem with that, they can send their complaints to my ancestors.

Something my dad once told me has stuck with me and really helped my journey of self-acceptance: "Don't let others paint you with their own colors." I'm not sure if that's some old Japanese saying or something he thought up while drunk, but it helped nevertheless. After finally being able to come to terms with my identity, my art started to progress and I eventually started to feel out my aesthetic.

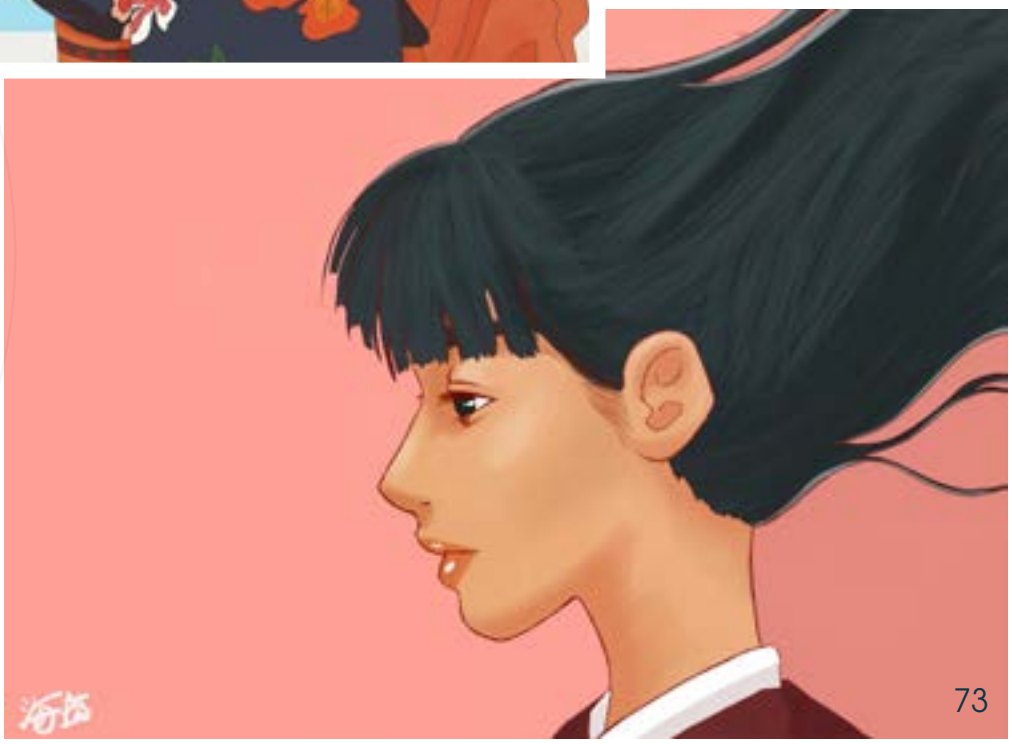
I like to explore Asian identity through most of the art I do. You're probably thinking, "Pretty girls and flowers? How original," right? I get it, but for me, the flowers represent society's expectations on us as humans. In my art, the presence of flowers and the motif of emergence represent themes of self-discovery—something that I have been trying to do with my own life.



Living in Japan as a mixed Japanese-American, I feel like I have to be assertive in the way I present myself. I express my pride in my heritage as much as possible. I correct people when they misidentify me. I even take the time to answer drunken questions middle-aged salarymen ask me in bars. Presenting an authentic image of yourself to the world can be a hard thing to do when first impressions are so often defined by looks and stereotypes. I'm sure many people of color working in Japan can understand what I'm trying to say.

My art means so much to me and even though it's not perfect, it's a reflection of my identity and how I feel. I'm proud to produce these images and tell my story. I'm currently working on creating enamel pins and stickers so that I can share my art with others. I sell and advertise my work via my Instagram: @kylewaffles. Any support will only help to grow my craft and would be greatly appreciated. I'm grateful to Japan and the JET Program for not only giving me an opportunity to hone my craft as an artist but for also helping me express my identity. I'm now glad to say that I was placed in Nagasaki.

Kyle Yukawa is a fourth year ALT in central Nagasaki Prefecture. His works are inspired by artists such as Little Thunder, Lauren Tsai, and James Jean, as well as pieces from Studio Ghibli films and Ukiyo-e woodblock paintings. Themes featured in his work include identity, self-realization, and balance.



Japanese Woodblock Prints

Kathleen Doster

Japanese woodblock prints, with their bright colors and instantly recognizable designs (who hasn't seen Hiroshige's "Great Wave" curving around Mount Fuji in the distance) are one of the most popular Japanese art forms. Woodblock prints were dispersed rapidly around the world upon the opening of Japan at the end of the Edo era, and introduced the West to the unique beauty of Japanese culture. The prints continue to be avidly collected and prized today as distinctively Japanese works of art. The most valued prints, those from the Edo period, are known as *ukiyo-e* and can be found both online and in specialty shops in Tokyo, Kyoto and other Japanese cities.

Printing made from carved, inked, wooden blocks were introduced to Japan from China around the 8th century AD, and were initially used only for written texts, then, beginning from the 11th century, for black line drawings of Buddhist pictures. Still later, these line drawings were sometimes colored in by hand to produce colored pictures but colored printing wasn't developed until the early 18th century.

The stability and prosperity of the Edo period led to the rise of a literate and sophisticated merchant class with more secular tastes in art. This gave birth to ukiyo-e, literally, pictures of the ukiyo, or "floating world", a lovely euphemism for the pleasure quarters, whose teahouses, courtesans, and kabuki actors were popular topics of paintings, drawings and woodblock prints. By 1744, new printing techniques allowed printers to stamp a single sheet of paper using multiple woodblocks, one for each of up to 20 colors, leading to the richly multicolored prints known as *nishiki-e* (brocade pictures).

The Japanese print artists, who often started as painters, worked with a team of craftsmen to produce woodblock prints. After the artist completed the original drawing, a copyist would outline the drawing onto a thin sheet of paper. The engraver then pasted this to a block of cherry wood and carved down the surface everywhere except the outlines; this became the key block. Another block would be carved for every color. The printer would then place ink on the remaining raised pattern of

the block and press washi paper, made from mulberry bark, onto the inked blocks, rubbing the back of the paper to press it evenly into the ink.

The first print run, usually a couple hundred prints, was the best quality, with crisp lines and visible wood grain seen in the print. Post printing treatments were often added, like graduated washes of color that were hand brushed onto the block (*bokashi*), hand burnishing certain colors to produce a high gloss, applying drops of *gofun* (crushed oyster shell) to simulate snow, application of mica, silver or gold, and embossing of patterns into the washi.

As the blocks wore down with successive printings, lines would become broken or thicker, sometimes colors were slightly out of register,

some color blocks might be discarded due to damage or loss, and the wood-grain pattern would be less visible; fewer premium treatments were added to these later printings, which were less valuable. For especially popular designs, new blocks might be cut; these are considered reproductions rather than originals and are of little value. except in rare cases (such as when the new blocks were cut under the original artist's supervision).

Common subjects of woodblock prints included: beautiful women (*bijin-ga*), kabuki actors in role (*yakusha-e*), warriors (*musha-e*), sumo wrestlers, landscapes and animals. Sometimes multiple sheets would be used (diptychs, triptychs, or more) to create large scenes, such as battlefields or kabuki scenes. There were also a large number of erotic prints (*shunga*) which were often unsigned to avoid trouble with censors. Certain topics or characters might be taboo, so artists would use indirect portrayals of kabuki plays or novels to get around the censors. Sometimes, they were insufficiently indirect, and both the artists and publishers were imprisoned. Partly due to censorship, and partly due to the sophistication of the public, ukiyo-e were often full of complicated puns, references and inside jokes. *Mitate*, a Japanese word that doesn't translate well, are a cross between allegories, comparisons and parodies, and were common in woodblock prints.

If you decide to explore the delightful and exotic world of ukiyo-e, be careful; they are highly addictive, and you could become a collector before you realize it. If so, please protect your prints by keeping them in acid-free portfolios, where you can enjoy looking at them for years. Do not be tempted to frame them and display them on your walls, because the delicate colors (largely from vegetable dyes) will fade over time with exposure to light.

woodblock prints. She writes frequently on medical issues and Japanese art.

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Rashaad Jorden
“There is no ‘i’ in team but there is in win.”
—Michael Jordan

Photo: Ashley Hirasuna

Staying Sane in the Time of *Coronavirus*

How to Keep Safe and Sane at this Uncertain Time

Caroline Allen (Tottori)

We're living in historic and unpredictable times. Our newsfeeds are full of anxiety-inducing facts about the spread of a virus with no cure, invisible and insidious. The scariest part is nobody knows how far-reaching it is. Nobody is safe.

So now that that cheerful news is out of the way, let's talk about ways you can stay sane in a country that forces you to desk-warm and where medical masks are rarer than diamonds.

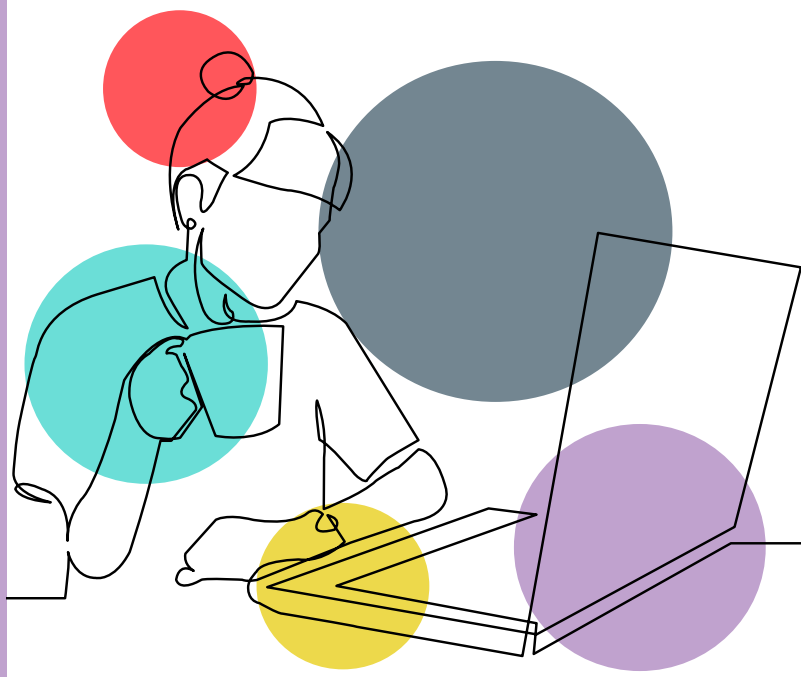
We're living in a time of division and uncertainty

This is a time unlike any we've lived through before but I think the sense of impending doom has been in the air for a while now. Life has been getting scarier, incrementally. Year on year, the world seems to grow more chaotic and unstable. Politics has become more extreme and surreal. The human impact on the world around us has become harder to deny. For many of the younger generations, it seems impossible to imagine the clean, neat future our parents could look forward to. Not only that but even the tools we use to communicate and connect, like social media, seem to divide us more than unite us. I've seen it myself and it saddens me. I think this new age of information has enormous power and potential for good, but it also exploits the worst weaknesses of the people who use it.

Our desire to be compassionate, curious, to refrain from immediate judgement and to see the humanity in the people we disagree with is immediately usurped by our desire to be instantly gratified, convinced of our self-righteousness and our infinite capacity to condemn and vilify. It's a fallacy to think of any era or time period as perfect, but it's wearying to be told this is "the worst" time. Everything is hyperbole. We're "trash", we're "cancelled," it's all funny until it isn't. I don't know how we are supposed to function with this constant drip-feed of opinions, facts, half-facts and immediate bulldozing judgement—a world where the biggest taboo is to say "I don't have an opinion on that yet."

Coronavirus arrived at an already chaotic time

Then the pandemic came. Quick and brutal, it spread throughout the world. Living partly in this world and partly in the twilight half-world of the internet, where we absorbed the gravity of the news. Something genuinely life-changing has happened and it doesn't feel quite real. We have this shadowy grasp on the reality that we may lose people we love and that—as kumbaya as it sounds—this affects all of us.



Chances are, you've survived tough times before

Nobody alive has ever lived through a pandemic quite as far-reaching as this one. Its domain is vaster than any world war that has preceded it. For those of us who grew up during the Great Recession, there's a good chance that all this talk of economic collapse will bring up memories of that tough time. We'll be isolated, alone, not thrust together to make the most of things. Like a recession, this will affect some of us more than others and it will make all of our futures much more frightening and uncertain. AOur lifeline to the outside world will be the internet, and that frightens me.

I spent all of my teenage years in an Ireland badly hit by the 2008 financial crash. I really want to say something plucky and spirited about how I ended up becoming resourceful and found charming ways to spend my days and make a bit of cash but honestly, it was terrible, not helped by the fact I was a bratty teenager. I remember the grey of those days. The feeling of going without and feeling less than. Yes, I was lucky. Yes, other people had it worse. But I'm telling you the truth of how it felt to me at that time.

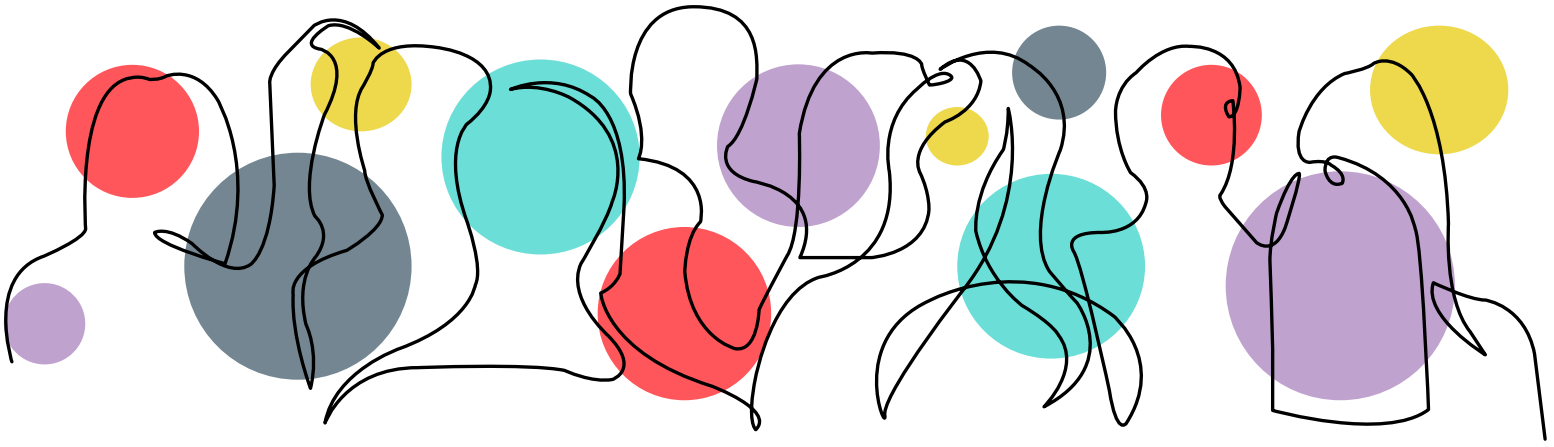
And yet, I survived. Nearly everyone did, some without their original dreams or businesses or houses intact. For me, for my family, for my country, it was a rocky journey that made us question our self-identity and sometimes made us really question ourselves. I know that another recession is on its way, on time in a cyclical fashion. This time I'm 24, not 14. I've had a taste of adult life and I've thought about what I want in life, and what I want is a sense of purpose and to belong to a solid community.

It's obvious, but limit your use of social media. Value a healthy dose of escapism

Everyone has a hot take online. Maintain your social distance from all unverified rumors and unproven cures. Stick to trusted sources, like the World Health Organization (WHO), national and international newspapers with good reputations and legitimate healthcare professionals. And if you can, try to maintain your distance from social media for a while.

There is a world of beauty out there: dozens of books, podcasts, and television series. It's OK to immerse yourself in another world, for a time. I've seen so many wonderful recommendations; for reading lists and old movies. Consider using this time to develop a new skill or hobby. There is a lot of good to be found in exercise, and there are many workout videos and yoga tutorials to be found online. It's also possible to use this time to brush up on your cooking skills or try out painting or another form of art. Whatever it is, try to find something that soothes your soul and distracts you in a healthy way.

Reach out to the people you love, at home and away. It doesn't have to be a long phone call, even a quick text or message sent to someone can restore a sense of normality and reassure you that the people you care about are safe and close to you in a meaningful way.



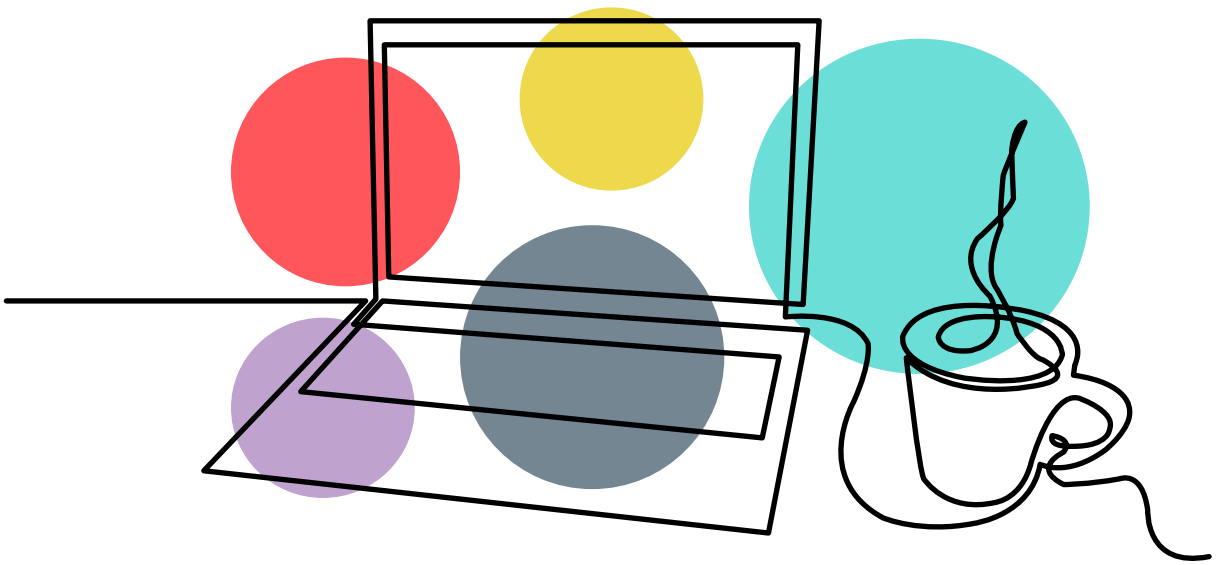
Surviving this uncertain future, together

We can survive this uncertain future if we find the humanity within each other. If we can laugh at each other's jokes. If we can still have crushes on each other. If we can explain our differences of opinion in a civilized way. We can also survive this time by leaning into ourselves and our values. Do we value kindness? Do we value courage? Do we value compassion? This is a time to reflect on things that run deeper than the divisions that have concerned us—often understandably—for so long.

Concrete ways you can help

There are concrete ways we can help each other. Try to stay in touch with people and offer a hand to your neighbors and community. Look out for those who seem isolated or vulnerable, especially those whose immune system might be compromised or those with underlying health conditions, both physical and mental. This is a time of high anxiety, especially for those suffering from conditions such as Generalized Anxiety Disorder or OCD.

Offer to deliver groceries for those who are housebound and don't be stingy or petty with an extra roll of toilet paper. This is a time to bury hatchets with those we might not be on good terms with. It's important to do as much as we can to help those who need our help. Please, whatever happens, don't panic. Let's stay safe together and try our best to be kind and hopefully we can come out of this experience better, not worse.



Stor
Cup

Vector graphics from vecteezy.com

Using what's in your cupboard to make tasty meals

Cupboard Cooking

Hazel Reilly (Tottori)

All over the world, people are making do with less. As the number of Covid-19 cases continues to rise in Japan, this is an opportunity to learn simple, affordable recipes that can be made in a pinch, using ingredients you can find in the cupboard. "But wait!" I hear you cry. "I don't know where to start!" That's where I'll step in to help you, *kouhai-chan*. Let's start with the basics: pantry staples.

What is a pantry staple? Basically, it's an ingredient that will keep for a long time and that you will use again and again. What you will consider a pantry staple will depend on what you like to cook. I'm somewhat fussy but even I've found it easy to eat affordably and tastily in rural Japan, using just a few choice staples.

Online, you'll find lots of different lists with recommended staples. Budget Bytes is a good, self-explanatory website with tips on everything from meal prep to kitchen skills.

As a general guide, a good store-cupboard should contain all the pantry staples that are essential for making teriyaki sauce; soy sauce, mirin and cooking sake. This is a versatile sauce that you can use with anything and (nearly) everything. In Ireland (where I'm from), a lot of cooking is oven-based but with a lack of range ovens, it's important to be more creative with a frying pan.

Another staple that you will find yourself turning to again and again is tinned, chopped tomatoes. These are cheap and easy to find in even the cheapest supermarket. They are perfect for stewing, making pasta sauces, for whipping up salsas at short notice and making Bloody Marys—and with the way Abe's handling this crisis, we'll need more than a couple.

Herbs and spices are likely to be the most expensive additions to your store-cupboard but once you've got a handle on them, you'll find they're your kitchen saviors, rescuing meals from blandness, along with generous helpings of salt, the occasional dash of sugar and the right use of heat and water.

Which herbs and spices you buy will depend on what style of cuisine you most like— the wonderful book Salt Fat Acid Heat has a great chart explaining the different spices used in each region. Japanese cuisine doesn't rely heavily on spice (with a few exceptions) and mostly dances between savory (umami) and sour, with lots of saltiness thrown in for good measure.

But maybe you prefer a kick of spice? In that case you can start to incorporate spices, with an eye on how different flavors work together. In fact, with a little trial and error you can even start to create your own blends. Again, I'm sure I don't need to point you to the many online lists you can find, but I'd like to point out one of my favorite (dare I say, most iconic?) spice blends: the "Everything Bagel" seasoning.

The wonders of pasta in all its various guises and glory need no introduction. Dried pasta is a great staple that can keep for a long time, takes no time to make and is just the thing to bring in a bento box for work the next day.

Which brings me to pasta sauce. Obviously if time is really an issue, you can buy the ready-made sauce but it's easy to make it yourself using tinned tomatoes, some garlic and maybe some chili powder thrown in for some kick. And salt. Lots and lots of salt. Though one shouldn't underestimate salt-serious health conditions, it's what makes savory food palatable and you need to use lots of it.

Another staple of lockdown baking is the humble banana bread. Given that bananas are the only halfway-affordable fruit in Japan, this is something you're likely to have to hand and—if your plans to eat more healthily have gone awry and your bananas have turned black—can be used to salvage even the most far-gone fruit.

cipes

Shashuka

The perfect brunch time recipe: a Middle Eastern staple that can be made with the simplest of ingredients.

Ingredients

- 1 medium onion, diced
- 1 red bell pepper, seeded and diced
- 4 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 2 tsp paprika
- 1 tsp cumin
- 1/4 tsp chili powder
- 1 28-ounce can whole peeled tomatoes
- 6 large eggs
  salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 small bunch fresh cilantro, chopped
- 1 small bunch fresh parsley, chopped

Method

Heat olive oil in a large sauté pan on medium heat. Add the chopped bell pepper and onion and cook for 5 minutes or until the onion becomes translucent.

Add garlic and spices and cook for an additional minute.

Pour the can of tomatoes and juice into the pan and break down the tomatoes using a large spoon. Season with salt and pepper, then bring the sauce to a simmer.

Use your large spoon to make small wells in the sauce and crack the eggs into each well. Cover the pan and cook for 5-8 minutes, or until the eggs are done to your liking.

Garnish with chopped cilantro and parsley.

Spaghetti Frittata

This is a recipe for cold, leftover, frankly unappetizing spaghetti to transform it into the most gorgeous comfort food.

Ingredients

- 200g day-old, cold spaghetti (plain or with tomato sauce)
- 3 eggs
- 3 tbsp grated parmesan or pecorino
- Salt and black pepper
- 3 tbsp diced mozzarella or other melting cheese (optional)
- Butter and oil, for frying

Method

Break the eggs into a bowl and whisk. Add the cheese, salt and plenty of pepper, then whisk again. Add the spaghetti and cubed cheese, and stir until the pasta is well-coated with egg.

Heat a little olive oil and butter over a medium-high flame, until the butter is foaming, then tip the mixture into the pan and fry for a minute, stirring constantly.

Press down on the mixture to even it out in the pan, turn the heat down to medium and leave to cook for two minutes, then use a plate to invert the frittata and fry on the other side until golden.

Banana Bread

Ingredients

- 1 small or medium very ripe banana, mashed, (at least 1/4 cup mashed)
- 1 large egg
- 1 tablespoon canola oil
- 1/4 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 1/2 cup white whole wheat flour or all-purpose flour
- 1/4 cup granulated white sugar**
- 1/4 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/8 teaspoon fine sea salt

Method

1. Adjust your toaster oven's cooking rack to the lowest placement and preheat to 350F on the "Bake" setting.

2. Grease only the bottom of a 3 x 5.75 x 2.5 inch mini loaf pan.

3. In a medium bowl stir together the mashed banana, egg, oil, and vanilla. Add the flour, sugar, baking soda, cinnamon, and salt. Stir until just combined and small lumps remain.

4. Pour batter into your prepared pan and bake until a toothpick inserted in the center is free of crumbs, about 24 to 28 minutes.

5. Allow bread to cool for at least 10 minutes before removing from pan to cool completely on a baking rack.

Background texture: Annie Spratt on Unsplash.com

Hazel Reilly is a second-year ALT living in Tottori prefecture who loves crafting, watercolours and discovering new places on her bike. Can often be seen at local festivals, sporting a colourful yukata.

FINDING YOUR THROW

David Atti (Chiba)

"I think I want to try judo."

I casually uttered those words to Mr. Sakai, the secretary at my elementary school. He was a good person to talk to about judo since he had been a *judoka* himself.

Mr. Sakai paused to look at me for a minute before starting to make calls like a stockbroker on Wall Street. He quickly arranged for me to meet Sunaga-sensei, the local fire chief and head instructor of Kamogawa Judo Club. So I went to the *dojo*, and on my first day, I was presented with a gift: my uniform.

The uniform formerly belonged to Sunaga-sensei's son, and it was practically a dojo relic since the fire chief's name was stitched in the lapel. I stared at the *judogi* that had been passed down to me. Kamogawa's characters were boldly embroidered in black on the right side. The *inaka* judo club welcomed its newest white belt.

Sunaga-sensei was explaining to me that the dojo's members were primarily firefighters and students when suddenly, one of the black belts roared "HEY! HEY! HEY!" as he sprinted into the dojo. This judoka was full of warmth and charisma. Sunaga-sensei cracked a smile before introducing me to Kazu, a 29-year-old fireman and former champion of Chiba Prefecture.

I immediately noticed his cauliflower ears, forged from years of *newaza* (ground technique(s)). He was in great physical condition, standing about 5 feet 6 inches and weighing a lean 68 kilograms. Sunaga-sensei said he'd like us to practice *randori* (free sparring) together. On the mat, Kazu quickly demonstrated to me what he referred to as "*bachi bachi judo*," throwing me up and down the dojo at will. When I established a grip and tried my best to throw him, he'd tease me, shouting, "*hoshii*" (close or almost) with a big grin on his face before slamming me onto the mat again. I staggered to get to my feet with the wind still knocked out of me. Meanwhile, Kazu was already on his second victory lap around the dojo again howling, "HEY! HEY! HEY!"

After my first taste of randori, I couldn't imagine how anyone could refer to judo as the "gentle way." When I think back on my first day, I showed two things if nothing else: my ignorance of the Japanese language and heart. Over time, this would prove to be a comical and perilous combination.

But Kazu eventually decided to take me under his wing after many more one-sided randori sessions, and all the black belts were excited when I told them I wanted to learn *uchi mata* (inner thigh throw). I was in the right place to do so. Everyone praised Sunaga-sensei as an "uchi mata master." Uchi mata is considered one of the more complex throws in judo as the timing needs to be perfect. Sunaga-sensei acted as *tori* and requested that Nori-san serve as his *uke*. Nori-san, one of many firemen in the dojo, resembled a Japanese Terry Crews due to his shaved head and "dynamite body." After witnessing the fire chief throw around the much larger man with ease, I thought I'd give uchi mata a try. I decided that this technique would be my main focus.

Kazu's wife, Aya, Kazu, David and Kazu's old senpai Makoto-san

Miyahara-san, Nakano-san, David and Kazu

KUZUSHI

In *The Art of W*ar, Sun Tzu writes, “All warfare is based on deception.” I started to understand this more after studying judo. I tried desperately to throw everyone with my uchi mata, but my attack was too transparent. In boxing terms, I felt like a crude slugger throwing wild haymakers against a slick counter-puncher. I telegraphed my throw in every way imaginable. Kazu joked that every time I’d try to throw him, my eyes would pop out of my head like that old-time cartoon wolf.

Tamaru-sensei, a fourth-degree blackbelt and absolute bear of a man, sought to remedy the situation with something he called *kuzushi*—the practice of “breaking your opponent’s balance” before throwing them. Tamaru-sensei grabbed my judogi and “broke my balance” with a forward throw, *ouchi gari*. I stumbled backwards on to my heels, fighting to stay on my feet. As I struggled to regain my footing, Tamaru-sensei abruptly yanked me forward on to my tippy toes and launched me into the air with a proper uchi mata. Suddenly, I was airborne. Sailing through the air, I couldn’t help but wonder how big of a hole my body would make when I hit the floor. Luckily, Tamaru-sensei kindly pulled up on my sleeve and lapel at the last minute so the impact wouldn’t cripple me.

He led me to a white board in the dojo to further illustrate his point. He imparted to me the need to use kuzushi in combinations. Tamaru-sensei broke down the combination he had just used on me. “*Ouchi gari, mae*!” (large-inner reap, forward!) he asserted while pointing to a small circular magnet on the white board. Next, he slapped a larger magnet on the white board and firmly said, “*uchi mata, ushiro*!” (inner thigh throw, back!). The blackbelt picked up a dry-erase marker and drew a line connecting the two magnets representing my new combination. These types of deceptive combinations effectively utilize kuzushi and are referred to in Japanese as “*renraku waza*.” To really ensure I was getting all this, Tamaru-sensei smiled as he concluded his lecture in English, “Do you understand?” I couldn’t help but laugh as I replied in my native tongue, “Yes, I understand!”

Tamaru-sensei’s lesson really resonated with me. I boxed for years as an amateur in the U.S. and I was starting to notice an overlap between the two combat sports. In my opinion, in the same way the pugilist sets up his knockout blow with a jab, the judoka employs kuzushi before a big throw. It is essential in both disciplines to disrupt your opponent’s rhythm by unbalancing them before following up with stronger attacks. If a boxer neglects the jab and only throws power punches, the other fighter can likely see them coming from a mile away. This approach is predictable and exposes the fighter to the risk of being countered. This was the same problem I was having during randori. Judokas and boxers both get to the level where they can effortlessly string together combinations from all angles by varying their attack. I tried to apply these concepts effectively using “deception” in my judo.

GAMAN SHITE

Six months or so into my first year on JET, my Japanese gradually improved along with my judo, although both were still cringeworthy at best. I started asking Tamaru-sensei, “What do I do during newaza in a judo match?” Tamaru-sensei gave me a detailed explanation in Japanese but I understood little more than “*gaman shite*.” This expression can mean “to be patient” or “to endure” depending on the context. One day, Tamaru-sensei was shocked to see me trying to “endure” a choke for too long. He quickly stepped in and asked, “Why don’t you just tapout?” I responded like Mifune Toshiro in a Kurosawa epic, “Gaman!” I barked. Tamaru-sensei erupted in laughter, swiftly cutting down all my samurai fantasies. After regaining his composure, he explained that during newaza, if the contestants are *inactive* on the ground, the referee will stand them up in a matter of seconds. “If that’s the case, just be patient!” he said before reproaching me, “You don’t *endure* a choke or an armbar!” My failed attempt at stoicism has since become one of Tamaru-sensei’s favorite stories to tell at the judo club’s wild drinking parties.

TOKUI WAZA

I practiced uchi mata for over a year, struggling to land it consistently during randori. I was beaten from pillar to post every week as Tamaru-sensei and Sunaga-sensei looked on, shouting instructions to me. My *senpai* started to embrace me more, making a great effort to explain uchi mata's mechanics in English when I couldn't understand his Japanese. One of Kazu's best throws was "*ippon seoi nage*" (one-armed shoulder throw), which he had used to throw me countless times during our "bachi bachi judo" sessions. I rarely practiced this throw but decided to go for it one day during randori, doing my best to emulate Kazu's movement and timing.

Everyone (including myself) was shocked when I pulled it off. Kazu told me that in our year of doing randori together this was the first throw I had truly earned (He even let out his customary "HEY HEY HEY!" saluting my progress). Sunaga-sensei and Tamaru-sensei told me I had finally found my "*tokui waza*" (signature move). Everyone was relieved that all those randori sessions weren't just senseless violence, and those who had helped me "find my throw" assured me this was just the beginning. But I couldn't afford to rest on my laurels for long—I was told our "bachi bachi judo" sessions would "level up" from that day forward.

The feeling of executing a perfect throw is surreal. If a judoka can execute a perfect throw during competition, they win by *ippon* (victory in one move) automatically ending the match. Until that moment, randori had felt laborious and stiff to me. A contest of strength against strength. When I was finally able to throw an opponent properly, it felt fluid and relaxed—almost effortless. It even sounded different. I started to compete and win via ippon using my new favorite throw. One day before practice, a shy chubby-cheeked elementary student approached me. His wide smile was missing a few teeth. I was incredulous when he asked that I teach him ippon seoi nage. This marked the start of my understanding of judo as the "gentle way."

Photos: David Atti

David Atti is currently a second-year JET in Kamogawa City, Chiba Prefecture. When not on the mats, he enjoys travelling and reading about the ***Sengoku Jidai****. David graduated from SUNY Geneseo with a degree in American Studies before coming to Japan.*

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JUDO GLOSSARY

Romaji	English Definition	Kanji
Judo	Gentle Way	柔道
Judoka	Judo Practitioner	柔道家
Judogi	Judo Uniform	柔道着
Newaza	Judo ground technique emphasizing pins, chokes and joint-locks.	寝技
Randori	Free Sparring	乱取り
Bachi-Bachi Judo	Bachi-Bachi is Japanese onomatopoeia for “Strong popping of a fire” “Bachi Bachi Judo” is the equivalent of a boxing “gym war.” Hard sparring more resembling an actual competition or real combat than practice	バチバチ柔道
Uchi Mata	Inner Thigh Throw	内股
Tori	One executing technique (the thrower)	取り
Uke	One receiving technique (the throwee)	受け
Kuzushi	Breaking opponents balance/unbalancing an opponent	崩し
Ouchi gari	Large Inner Reap	大内刈
Renraku Waza	Combination Techniques	連絡技
Ippon Seoi Nage	One Armed Shoulder Throw	一本背負い投げ
Tokui waza	Best technique or signature move	得意技
Ippon	Victory in one move/one point	一本

FROM 0 TO 100K

Rhema Baquero (Kobe)

Ethan Wang rolled out of his hotel bed in the early morning for one of the biggest challenges of his life, the Okinawa 100K Ultra Marathon on December 15, 2019. Like a kid before Christmas, anticipation kept him up nearly all night. Wearing an Aquaman cosplay, he arrived at the bus just before 3a.m. to see hundreds of fellow competitors. A wave of comradery hit him, and he knew he was ready for the race.

“That was such an encouragement. You feel the energy. It's kind of like going to war. It's your brotherhood. You're feeding off that energy of that anticipation, so that woke me up,” he said. “The atmosphere at 4, 5 in the morning as people are out there trying to run a hundred. There’s kind of like nothing like that in the world. People are dedicated. Right away, I'm like ‘Yeah man, I can do it. I'm psyched’.”

Wang arrived in Kobe on the JET Programme in 2001. At the end of his contract, an ALT position opened with the Amagasaki Board of Education.

“The timing was just perfect,” he said. “I didn't even have time to really go home. I just hopped over to Korea. Left Japan and came back in as a tourist. I had that visa before Amagasaki City helped me with the working visa.”

The Taiwan-born, American-raised Wang ran track and field and cross country while in high school in New Jersey, but hated it.

“I was terrible at it. I was just doing that to kind of fulfil requirements. I tried football during freshman year and that was a huge commitment,” he groused. “As a freshman in high school, you just want to try and do different things.”

Wang was always into fitness but did not become serious about running until about five years ago, when he began running to help his then-wife. She wanted to do a physically challenging activity to help regain confidence after recovering from a prolonged illness and surgery.

“We started running together. She wanted to do a marathon to prove to herself that she could

overcome any sickness. Which kinda makes sense, right? A marathon is no easy task, so if you can do that, then you're OK," he said.

They trained, applied to different marathons and were accepted into the 2015 Kyoto Marathon. They finished together with a time of 04:43:52.

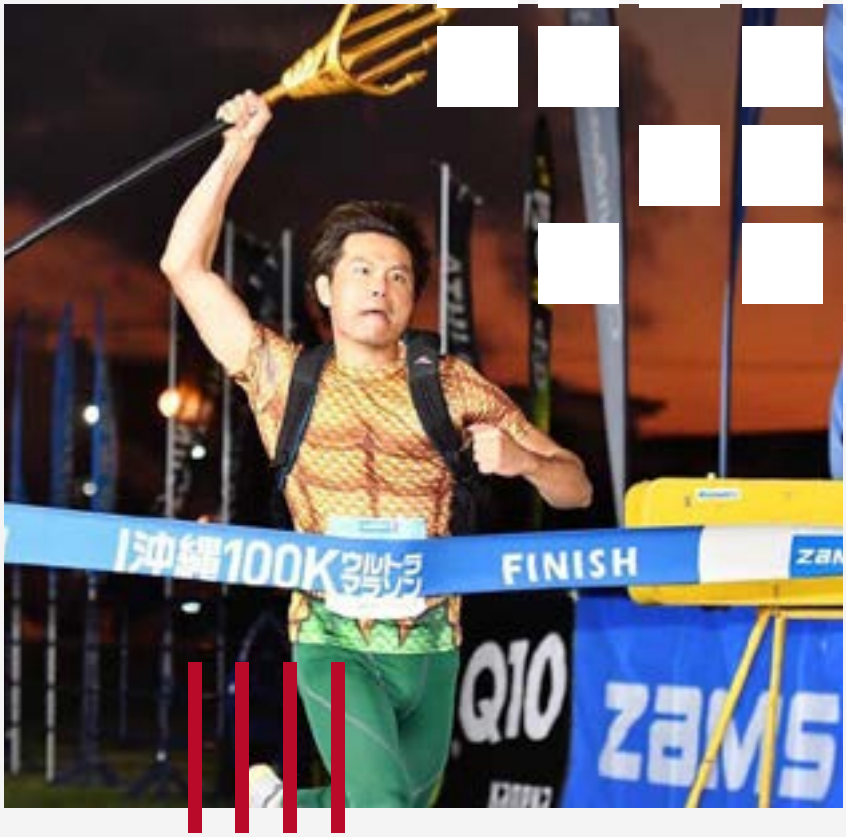
"We did it. We did the marathon in Kyoto, and we started together and finished together," he said. He did not imagine that it would be as fulfilling as it was. After they parted ways, he kept running as a way to cope and find peace.

"I was going through a difficult time in my life. I started to run to exercise and it was the perfect thing for me. For more than a year I couldn't sleep. I was just going through a lot of stress trying to balance what happened. It was a huge problem," he said. "Running was very, very therapeutic. When you're running, especially those difficult workouts you don't really think about anything else."

Running became a way to focus on the present and free his mind from negativity.

"So I kept going and going, further and further, more and more, and longer and longer. It just became an addiction. Which could be a problem but it was the only way I could kind of cope with what was happening."

The following fall, he entered the Kobe Marathon on his own. Wang improved, running 03:44:25, and the race solidified his desire to continue marathons. But he doesn't care about his times. He is all about having fun. Hence, the cosplay element.



GANBARE SUPERMAN

On October 30, 2016, Wang entered the Osaka Marathon, and since it was close to Halloween, ran dressed as Superman.

“When you're running in a superhero costume, especially Superman, it kind of gives you more energy and power. And you feel like you can go faster,” he said.

Runners take notice and strike up conversations when they see him. He appreciates their interest and enjoys talking about his costume and props—even if it slows him down.

“It's an ice breaker. No matter where you go, if you're weird, people will talk to you. They have questions they want to ask, so that makes [running] more interesting and amazing,” he said.

After these past five years of running, even the lows have become a positive. For the first couple of years, sometimes he wanted to give up during races. Cramps and muscle pain were not just physical but mental as well.

“It's a learning process. The more you do it, the more you learn how to cope with the difficulties, the challenges,” he said. “Even though your body says stop, someone says, ‘You can do it! Just one step at a time! Keep going!’ That’s what I dealt with, is you feel even though these people don't know me, they are trying to support me the best they can. That's huge. I owe it to them to try my best and keep going.”

But Wang thinks that sometimes it is more difficult to quit running than it is to keep going.

“I think that's also an addiction. For me, when I get those pains, that's when I get a kick out of it. Sometimes, I feel more energetic; I feel more challenged,” he said. “I don't know if this is what goes through a masochist's head, psychology wise, but I think part of it is that when there is pain, there is relief. I know in my head that there is a relief, and that's a super high, and therefore I eat it up.”

Ultimately, his body got used to the pain. He wanted to feel the highs and the lows again because they make him feel alive. So a year ago, he decided to tackle ultra marathons after being recommended the book Born to Run.

ULTRA RACING

Wang's first ultra run was during Golden Week last May in Mukogawa as the Winter Soldier. That 70-kilometer run took him back and forth along the river banks. Reaching 42.196 kilometers during this race taught him a lot about himself.

"Between 42 and 70 was painful. But I asked for it!" he declared. "You start imagining things. It is like an out of body experience. Part of that race was kind of like a dream. I think my mind was trying to escape it."

The race taught him tolerance levels and new ways to cope. He made phone calls to family and friends, Instagrammed images, and listened to motivational talks by his favorite actor, Denzel Washington. He even applied his meditation techniques of mindfulness to the most painful moments.

"You learn about patience," he said. "Imagine doing anything in your life for six hours in your life non-stop—even anything that can be super fun. Doing that is mentally stressful."

On the morning of the Okinawa 100K Ultra Marathon, Wang stood in pitch blackness soaking in the anticipation. As he ran, he took moments to absorb an Okinawan scenery much different from his Kansai home. He let his mind slip from the thoughts of his burning leg muscles, the heave of his focused breath, the sounds of his footsteps steadily pounding the pathway. He even stopped to take in the southern sunrise.

"I don't know if it was because I'm running a 100K or something," he said. "It was the most beautiful sunrise I've ever experienced. I mean it's a cliché, people are like 'Sunrise, I've seen a thousand of them in a lifetime' but for some reason, I think there was so much emotion in the air, in my head, that changed your perspective. . . or it is that beautiful. It was amazing."

Wang said Okinawa helped him realize that most things in life don't matter.

"There were points during that run where you experience that it was just nothing. I don't know how to describe it. I don't know if it was relief, freedom, or it was more like peace," he said.

“It was peaceful more than anything I think. I feel that was kind of my path.That my journey through all these runs . . . that was part of something that I was supposed to experience.”

On paper, this race was one of the most physically challenging things he has ever done.

“It was more than I could imagine what the experience would be,” he said. “I would describe it as maybe the most spiritual thing I've done. Which is not what I expected.”

The transition from marathon to ultramarathon was painful, but for him, the leap from 70K to 100K was easier and more pleasurable than a shorter run.

“The journey has been insane. It’s sick. And I’m not finished! I’m going to continue to do what I want to do. I’m going to continue to do regular half marathons, different kinds of races, and I’m going to continue to costume because I’m still loving it.”

Wang said he cannot wait to see what’s for him. Running has changed his way of thinking for the better.

“I’m super happy. Maybe the happiest point ever in my life. What I truly believe is in order to be happier and be satisfied and to be content you also need the challenges and the difficult parts and the negative parts in order to move up to the next stage,” he said. “So I welcome the negative parts about life and I think the difference is I know how to deal with it better and how to grow from it and how to learn from it. I embrace it. I don’t see it as a negative thing because everything negative in life I think it ends with something positive. The funny thing is that it’s working.”

Wang finds it ironic that despite running that first marathon for someone else, he himself grew as a person.

“I had no idea at that time that [running] was something that I would need to use to help guide me through recovery from what was going to happen next,” he said. “So who knows, right? Running saved me. Sounds religious, but that is the honest truth.”

RACE HISTORY

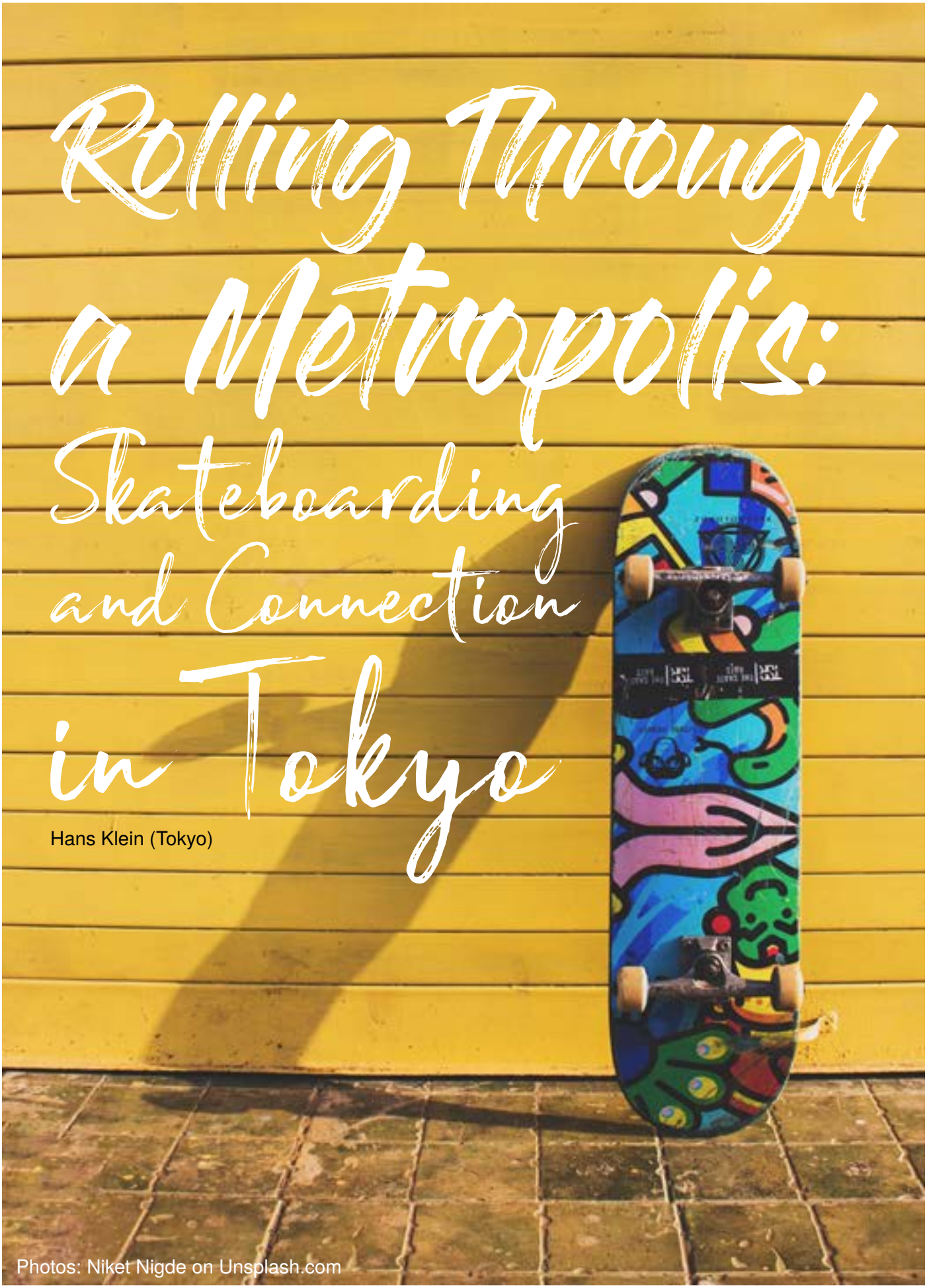
2020-02-16: **KIX Senshu Marathon** - 04:10:23 cosplay: War Machine + Punisher
2019-12-15: **Okinawa Ultra (100km)** - 13:03:53 cosplay: Aquaman
2019-12-01: **Osaka Marathon <2nd time>** - 04:36:29 cosplay: Deadpool
2019-11-17: **Kobe Marathon <2nd time>** - 04:39:22 cosplay: Thor
2019-11-03: **Nishinomiya Koshien Half** - 01:50:58 cosplay: Tiger Mask
2019-10-13: **Miki City Ultra (60km)** - 06:29:54 cosplay: Logan
2019-07-14: **Coney Island Half** - 01:56:58 cosplay: Hulk
2019-06-09: **Koyasan Ultra (50km)** - 06:03:41 cosplay: Captain America
2019-05-03: **Mukogawa Ultra (70km)** - 07:47:07 cosplay: Winter Soldier
2019-03-17: **Seoul Marathon** - 03:30:29 cosplay: Black Panther
2019-01-13: **Taipei Marathon** - 03:47:58 cosplay: Iron Man
2018-12-08: **HAT Kobe Marathon** - 03:52:56 cosplay: Spider-Man (red)
2018-11-11: **Okayama Marathon** - 03:44:51 cosplay: Spidey (black) / Venom
2018-02-25: **Tokyo Marathon** - 03:54:46 cosplay: Batman
2017-02-26: **Himeji Marathon** - 03:32:36 cosplay: Flash
2016-12-11: **Nara Marathon** - 03:35:37
2016-10-30: **Osaka Marathon** - 03:35:12
2015-11-15: **Kobe Marathon** - 03:44:25
2015-02-15: **Kyoto Marathon** - 04:43:52
2014-10-05: **Yodogawa Half** - 02:05:47

Photos: Ethan Wang

Rhema Baquero is a second-year ALT from America in the great port city of Kobe. She can often be found in a coffee shop either reading, writing, drawing, or studying Japanese. After playing rugby at university and graduate school, she was excited to finally attend the Rugby World Cup.

Rolling Through a Metropolis: Skateboarding and Connection in Tokyo

Hans Klein (Tokyo)



Photos: Niket Nigde on Unsplash.com

At Komazawa Skateboard Park in the middle of a blistering Tokyo summer, groups of tired people took refuge in whatever shade they could find. Some sipped Pocari Sweat under a little gazebo. Others rested under a crop of trees or a wall casting shadows. Sounds of metal crashing into metal cracked through the thick air. Yips and yells rang out. T-shirts draped over a black, chain-link fence, and most people cruised around with backs glistening in the hot sun. There was no breeze that day, and heat stroke was something people warned about. But the skateboarders kept rolling until the sun went down.

There is a recurring sentiment in the skateboarding world that asserts skaters are the same all over the world. It's a concept originating from the belief that a skateboard creates a shared experience across borders and cultures. There is some truth to that idea. Skateboarding occupies an ambiguous space between physical sport and creative expression. On one hand, riding a skateboard requires a lot of coordination and, like other sports, the ability to master certain skills that show whether someone is talented. However, unlike a lot of other sports, there isn't a consensus of what those skills are, as there are as many ways to judge a skateboarder's ability as there are skateboarders. So while people all over the world might be riding the same piece of wood with wheels, what's considered cool can change depending on the place, person, time, etc.

Photos: Sean Benesh on Unsplash.com

Exposure in a New Media Landscape

Japan's skate scene has recently entered the international limelight, especially with skateboarding securing a spot in the (now postponed) Tokyo Olympics. For many years, the industry was US-centric, with pockets of skaters coming from places like Europe, Brazil, Canada, and South America. Now, that scope is widening. Like for many industries, the internet and social media has upended long-held notions of normalcy. Gone are the days where a handful of US companies dominated the market. With their print media almost eliminated (the only remaining large publication being the well-known magazine *Thrasher*), skate companies have moved marketing directly to their audience. This meant smaller companies could, in theory, reach the same amount of people as the bigger brands via Instagram. Companies from all over the world have gained larger followings, due in part to featuring professional skateboarders in their advertising.

This is true for Japan as well. Social media has greatly increased visibility for the skate scene and skaters. People like Horigome Yuto and Sanbongi Shin are household names in the skating world, in part because of their large followings on social media. Larger companies have been taking notice of their popularity as well. In January 2020, Nike's SB division released a video titled "Wamano" that features only Japanese skateboarders.

Refuge Between Buildings

The starting point for most skateboarders is a skateboard park, and Komazawa serves as a hub for skaters in Tokyo. It's free to use, more centrally located than a lot of other parks, and built well. Komazawa's two box-shaped obstacles and three ramps are certainly minimal in terms of skatepark design, and if judging on construction alone, Komazawa can be considered decent. But Komazawa, like most skateparks, can't be judged exclusively by design—its true value can be found in the role it plays in the community. As the skateboarding spot that's closest to central Tokyo, it's where many skaters congregate.

Being an area to congregate is almost as important as the construction of the skatepark itself. If skateboarding straddles the line between creativity and sport, then one of the reasons it does so is because of the communal nature of the activity. For a lot of skaters, hanging out is as much a part of skateboarding as riding a skateboard. It's not uncommon to see someone so focused on a trick that they become the target of derision. "They're so serious" might not seem like an insult, but in an environment dedicated to an act of play, if someone looks like they're not having fun, that's strange. The skatepark allows people to practice their skills, but it also provides a place for the community to come together. It's for letting out a "yeee" when someone performs a trick they've been trying over and over again. It's for giving high fives and for cracking a cold drink when it's time to relax after a long day.

The skatepark might fulfill the role of a gathering spot but often, the essence of skating is still in the streets for many skaters. It's where they can take what they've practiced and apply it to any obstacle. The obstacles at a skatepark are carefully crafted to provide an enjoyable experience, but in the streets, skaters must

use their imagination to turn a man-made object into an obstacle that can be used for skateboarding. If they can pull that off, the tricks and obstacles produce an expression of vivid creativity.

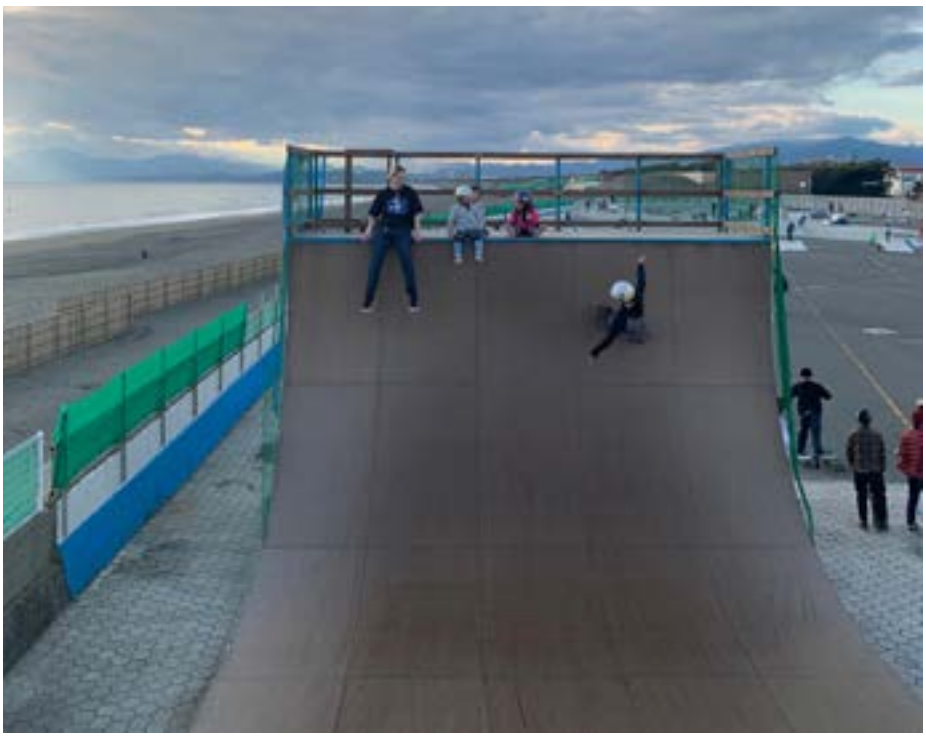
However, unlike a designated park for skateboarding, the legality of skating in public and private areas is complicated. Cruising around Tokyo, you might find beautiful marble ledges or staircases that seem tailor-made for skateboarding. But just like in other countries, skateboarders face resistance. For as long as skaters have imagined tricks on objects that don't belong to them, there have been people who have objected to such acts on their property. This is apparent in Tokyo as stories about run-ins with authority figures abound. Japanese skaters attempting to ride around a busy central area of Tokyo could be subjected to a trip to the local police station, a strip search, and questioning.

For foreign skateboarders, the consequences of performing tricks where they're not supposed to seem milder. They might also get a free ride, but to their place of residence with a slap on the wrist. While confrontations like these do occur, it's more common that skateboarders are asked to leave shortly after arriving at a spot. Just the sound of wheels on the ground might send a security guard running.

Skateboarders tend to be strong-willed; it is almost a necessity considering they fall repeatedly until a successful trick is performed. This tenacity extends to finding ways around people who might object to skateboarding. For a long time, Japanese authorities captured video of skateboarders riding around at night because the early morning hours offered the only reliable reprieve from security and the police (check out one of the videos of Miyagi Gou from the late aughts to see floodlights illuminating various street obstacles in the middle of the night). This is still largely the case in the center of Tokyo. Skaters wishing to cruise around Shibuya or Harajuku without obstruction will have to wait until after the last trains have departed. For those who prefer the daytime, travelling to quieter areas around the city can prove successful as the relatively empty streets provide greater skateboarding freedom.

Finding a Place

The dubious legality of skateboarding has placed it somewhere between being a shunned subculture or being a selectively cherry-picked mainstream trend. Walking around Tokyo, it probably won't take long to spot someone in Supreme, Palace, or Thrasher-branded clothing (all companies with roots in the skateboarding industry), but ask a Japanese skater what the average Japanese person thinks of them, and they will probably tell you there is still a significant stigma. The idea of skater-as-delinquent persists in many parts of the world, but it could be even more apparent in Japan. Even as the country is preparing for skateboarding in the Olympics, it is still common to see "No Skateboarding" signs depicting an image of a stereotypical young miscreant or to see a skeptical glance while riding the train with a board in hand.



This negative connotation might not persist if skateboarding was viewed purely as a competitive activity. If skaters performed in arenas surrounded by bleachers and crowds, then maybe Japan and the rest of the world would embrace the sport with open arms. Tokyo could tear down the signs with silly illustrations, security guards might not run as much, marble ledges everywhere might not look so worn down. If this happened, if skateboarding events were held solely in competitive venues, if nobody ever heard the clicking sound of wheels on a sidewalk, then maybe the stigma would cease.

A Choice to Be Made

Skateboarding is a competition with huge crowds in a massive arena. That is a very real thing, but it is also rolling around a parking lot by yourself. Skateboarding is sharing the skatepark with dozens of other skaters on a hot summer day, or it's staying up until 4a.m. just to be able to use that typically prohibited obstacle. As long as you have a skateboard, you can participate. That's true in Japan, but also anywhere in the world.

What makes skateboarding great is that it can be so many things at once. The difficulty in defining skateboarding might be the one thing that all skaters are familiar with. Despite a skateboarder's choice in style, tricks, or terrain, most skaters realize there are countless ways to exist in the sport. Maybe then it would be better to say that skaters are not actually the same at all. Every person applies their own unique mindset to the piece of wood under their feet. Rather than being the same all over the world, maybe skateboarders are all different, and what connects them isn't their similarity, but a shared appreciation for the incredible potential for diversity. Maybe it is the understanding that no matter how someone chooses to skateboard, they have made a choice to keep pushing.

Photos: Jan Kopriva on Unsplash.com

Hans Klein is a first-year JET ALT living in Tokyo. His home is the land of dreamy concrete playgrounds (skateparks) in the Northwestern part of the United States, but he never tells people how much he loves walking under old pines.

Photos: Hans Klein

A Windy Adventure Around Rishiri Island

Sheila Mulherin (Hokkaido)

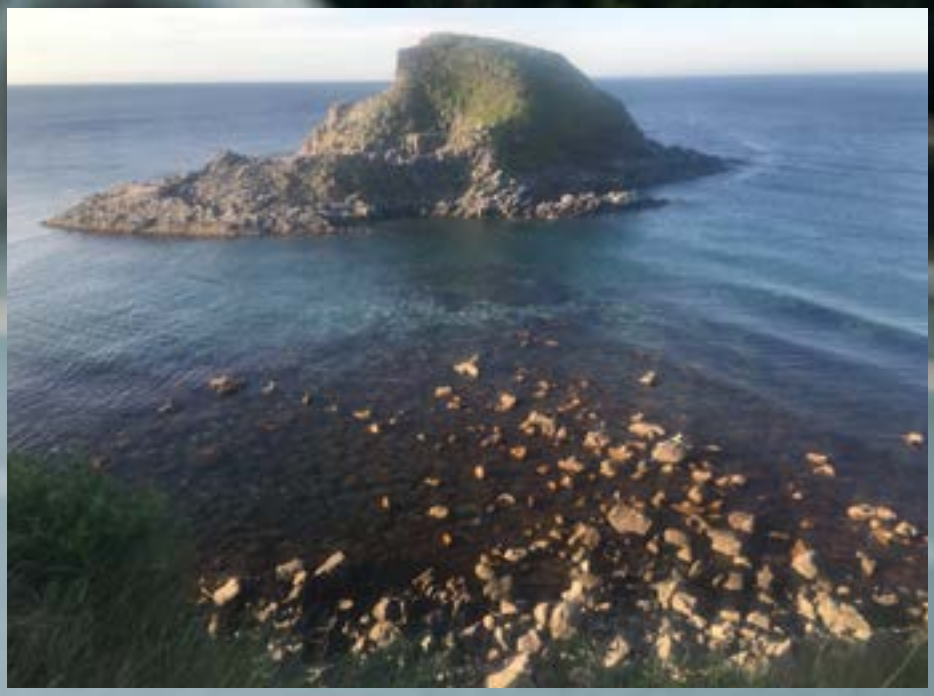
Rishiri Island is a beautiful place in Hokkaido with quaint fishing towns, two ports, historical sites, and a seal pool. Mount Rishiri, among the 100 famous mountains in Japan, presents a challenging hike with a stunning view at the top. Rishiri Island is also where Japan's first foreign English teacher, Ranald McDonald, arrived (in 1848). The island measures a little over 50 kilometres in circumference, small enough to take a day-trip ride around on a bicycle or motorbike—both of which are available and cheap to rent.

I came to Rishiri Island to get a final training run in before the Lake Saroma 100km Ultramarathon, and to admire all of Rishiri's stunning natural beauty with my own two feet. Every June, a 53-kilometre ultramarathon is held on the island, and it serves as a perfect final long training run before the Lake Saroma 100km Ultramarathon—as well as a wonderful adventure in its own right. The Rishiri Island 53km features a challenging hilly course, with strong wind almost always guaranteed. It's the right race for me, although I will be asking a lot out of my body. I also had registered for a 43-kilometre mountain run (in record high temperatures) for the week before the Rishiri Island 53km, but I decided to ignore the huge demand I'd be putting on my legs two weeks in a row. I had faith I would survive.

Early on the Friday before race day, I drove more than five hours along the Sea of Okhotsk to the port in Wakkanai, where I took the mid-morning ferry to Rishiri Island. My ferry ticket included a separate room for 10-12 people, with space for each person to pull out a futon and sleep. I took a quiet, pleasant nap.

The ferry arrived at Oshidomari port, where hostel staff picked me up. I had settled into the hostel earlier than the other runners, who arrived on Saturday. I decided to come a day earlier to tour the island more leisurely. However, I was greeted by a powerful storm—heavy rain pelted down sideways, and the wind blew fiercely. I cinched the hood on my raincoat, walked around Oshidomari, and found a decent onsen to relax at. I learned the hostel I had booked, like the many in Japan, would only heat their bath water in the evening. Likewise, every onsen in Oshidomari only opens in the afternoon, which is more environmentally friendly. I had plans to go for a run in the morning and preferred feeling clean afterwards, however, and wanted a morning bath. Fortunately, the hostel staff were willing to turn the water heater on in the morning for me.

kground photo: Sporlab on Unsplash.com



Better yet, on Saturday, the weather cleared up a bit and the wind gusted intermittently, so that made the day before the race a bit more pleasant. I went to the event headquarters and acquired my race packet, local *omiyage* (including various packages of seaweed and snacks) and a cloth race bib. Back at the hostel, runners started checking in, and I met a lot of them in the main dining room. Everyone introduced themselves, and I struck up conversation with my fellow competitors. Those enjoyable chats got me excited for the race.

After the friendly chatter, I went back to the ferry terminal and rented a motorbike to buzz around the island. Before moving to Japan, I owned a small motorbike, so I missed the liberating feeling of zipping along an open road. I felt a bit of a chill as I rode, so I stopped at a small museum to warm myself up and continued onwards to a rest stop. I took advantage of an abundance of delicious free samples, including Rishiri Kelp, *senbei*, and tea. Next, I visited the southernmost point of Rishiri Island, where I saw seals swim and play in an enclosed pool among the rocks in the ocean before I relaxed at a lovely oceanside onsen in Kutsugata.

I went back to the port to return the motorbike before dark, and had dinner with the other runners at the hostel. I fried veggie croquettes for everyone, and they shared their food as well. We all enjoyed each other's company, and the gregarious atmosphere refreshed and rejuvenated me. The weather forecast for race day seemed promising.

Photos: Sheila Mulherin

Background photo: Tomasz Wozniak on Unsplash.com

Sheila is an English teacher in Hokkaido. Originally from Boston, U.S.A., she can be seen hiking, reading, trying out new vegan recipes, playing with her adorable cats Bailey and Maisy, or running obscenely long distances on the roads and trails. She also looks forward to the Hokkaido winters when she can cross-country ski.

Race day comes!

Race day morning came, and I was among the first awake. We could either jog to the start or arrive there via the shuttle van. Many who entered the 53-kilometre race seemed too young (in my opinion) to run such a long distance, which concerned me a bit. But I learned it's normal for Japanese high school students to do an annual *kyouho*, or long-distance race walk. They start the race together, but don't have to finish it. They don't even need to run any of it. This news appeased me, and I wished the students good luck. We had a group photo (later printed on a large glossy sheet and mailed out to every participant), a countdown, and . . .

We all set off. We ran by my hostel, where staff cheered us on enthusiastically. Wind blew hard intermittently, but the sun shone all day. The course proved challenging and hilly, with ample bathrooms and aid stations regularly spaced out throughout the course.

My strategy for the race had been to do the same run/walk intervals I'd planned for the 100-kilometre race a month later—run 20 minutes, walk 5 minutes, and repeat. This time, however, I felt energized, so I decided against it. In the second half, I was a bit fatigued and decided to initiate my run/walk intervals. The scenery's beauty captured my attention, weaving through small fishing villages with waves crashing against the rocks. The expansive blue sea was on my right while Mount Rishiri, towering into the clouds, was on my left. Near the halfway point, a series of challenging steep hills greeted the runners, so most of us walked uphill.

I ran alone for the last 20 kilometres of the race. The wind had calmed down, so I focused on maintaining a comfortable pace and taking in the stunning ocean views. *Taiko* drummers playing along the course inspired and reinvigorated me with their strong pulsing beats. At the aid stations I ate fruit, *onigiri* and *daifuku*, turning down the sugary cola and candy. Then the pain set in with 10-15 kilometres to go.

I battled my way to the finish line, with strong gusts of headwind coming at me. Sprinting through Oshidomari, three women watched me with curiosity from the sidewalk. One of them stated matter-of-factly, "*Gaikokujin, gambatte*" while the others nodded in agreement and clapped

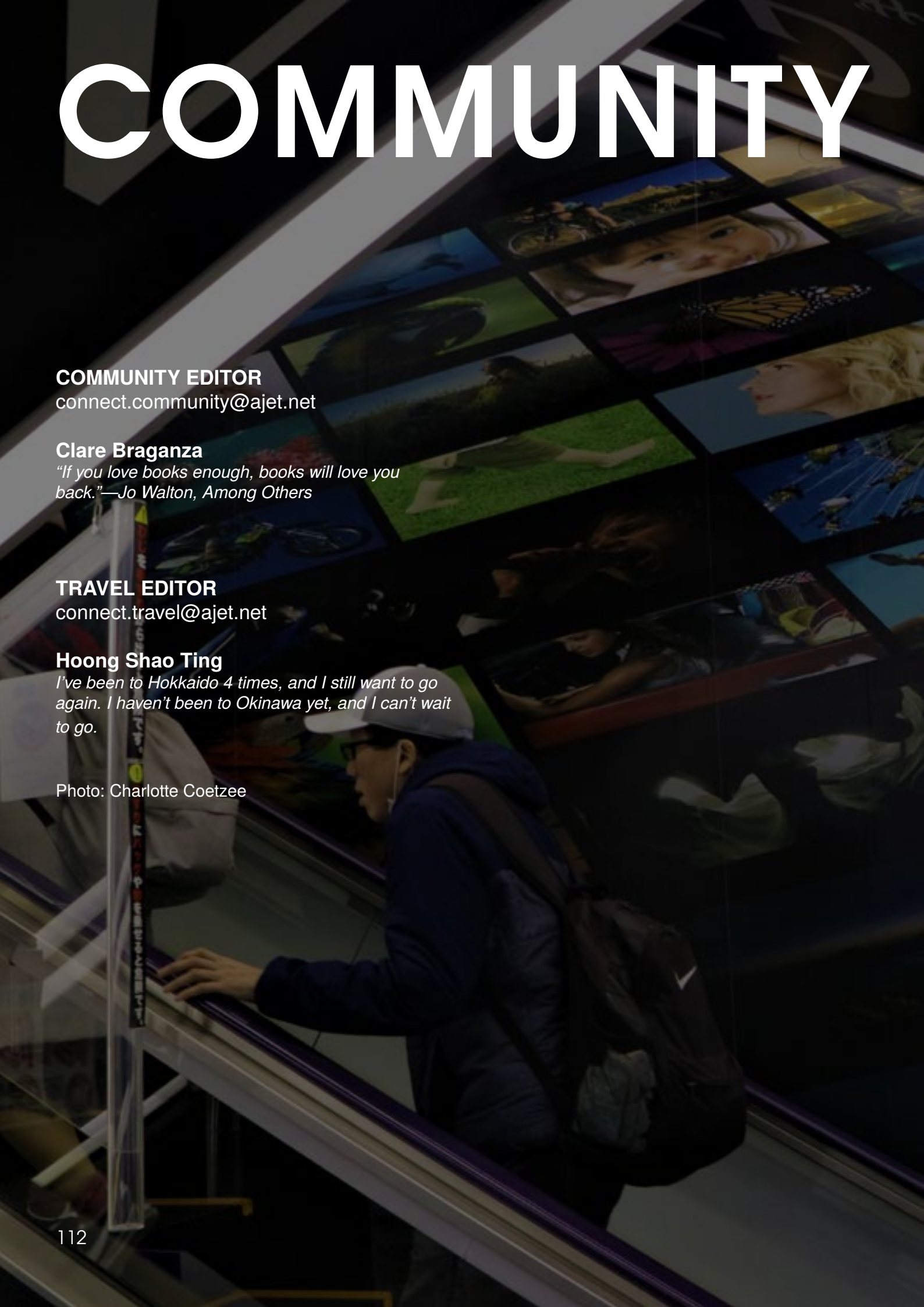
heartily as I went by. I sprinted through the finish and wobbled to the ground as a volunteer approached me to take the chip off my shoe. Children watched me, exclaiming “whoa!” at my dramatic tumble. I hadn’t done a dramatic tumble in a long time—the race kicked my butt! My finish time was 6 hours, 14 minutes. I had just completed my first 50-kilometre race! I came in 32nd place out of 156 women, a satisfying performance for me.

Later however, showering proved painful in the sensitive places that had chafed during the race, despite applying Vaseline beforehand (I made a mental note to bring more and continue applying it throughout my next ultramarathon). I didn’t want to move. Fruitlessly, I tried to will the pain away. I had to wash up, of course, and I winced as the water hit my raw spots. My pain was audible, so I was glad to be alone. I gingerly washed up and made my way back to my room to stretch. As I stretched in my room, I noticed the arch muscles in my feet spasming and crawling as if worms were trying to wriggle out from under my skin. That meant my foot muscles went through a hard workout and I hadn't consumed enough nutrients. Fortunately, the spasms stopped when I ate a proper meal in the dining room.

More runners trickled into my hostel. Since a lot of them had a runner's high, chatting about the race was easy and I ended up exchanging contact information with several of them. Most left quickly, but on the ferry the next morning, we had a little reunion nonetheless. We got to know each other better through stories about life in our respective cities and countries. We also shared stories of outdoor adventures similar to what we had on Rishiri Island before parting ways in Wakkanai.

The island’s quaintness and stunning scenery, and the friendships I made with the other runners in the hostel made this experience unforgettable. The physical challenge the race presented to me was a tough and satisfying experience as well. All in all, embarking on adventures alone is a rewarding experience. Never let being alone stop you from traveling. Openly introduce yourself to others around you and others just might respond positively. Lasting friendships can blossom, creating unforgettable experiences and cherished memories.

COMMUNITY



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Clare Braganza
“If you love books enough, books will love you back.”—Jo Walton, Among Others

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Hoong Shao Ting
I’ve been to Hokkaido 4 times, and I still want to go again. I haven’t been to Okinawa yet, and I can’t wait to go.

Photo: Charlotte Coetzee


“時間”

Not *just* a JET Dependent —The SENPAI (先輩 senior)

They've settled in Japan and work to achieve their own goals

Rhema Baquero (Hyogo)

Between working the maximum 28 hours a week their dependent visa allows and spending time with their families, the factotum father, **Franmar Mongcopa**, and multifaceted musician **Marc Baquero**, have found time to focus on their interests and to find a personal fit in Japan.

To read about the kohai dependents, check out the article in the April issue.

 Valentin Autonucci on Unsplash.com

Both Mongcopas were teachers in the university town of hot and rainy Dumaguete City, Philippines. He taught senior high school physical science, the vocational subject of wellness and massage, and also taught junior high general science and caregiving. School in the Philippines is very different from Japan, starting in June and ending in March. They worked in a classroom of a minimum of 60 students, with 15 sitting on the floor, and 35 textbooks to distribute in a class.

Before moving to Japan, **Franmar Mongcopa** and his wife Catherine spent four years apart, with her working in Chiba as a preschool teacher and him in England as a waiter. They were married in 2007, but the distance was still very difficult for them.

“After four years, around 2008, I made her come home so we could have our baby,” he said. “We would see each other just once a year on our vacation and then we would go our separate ways. I would go to England and she goes to Japan.”

Eventually, Cathy wanted to go back to Japan, and heard about the JET Programme. They moved here in 2016 with their then 5-year-old son, Francis Nikolai.

“I told her if you get it, then we’ll go. If not, the talk about applying for a job abroad is going to stop. But then God willing, they gave it to her,” he said. “That’s why we are here. And it’s a good thing.”


Franmar Mongcopa


Marc Baquero

Marc Baquero struck up a conversation with Rhema in the kitchen of mutual friends’ house in the summer of 2012. Both were exhausted from work and did not intend to go to the housewarming party that night.

“I saw her from afar and admired her Pokémon earrings,” he said. “I decided that I wanted to go talk to her.” They began dating the following week, and nearly three years later had a DC vs Marvel-themed wedding with sprinkles of Pokémon.

The Baqueros wanted to live in a new country before they were too old and had too many roots to prevent them from doing so. He said they both had a fascination with Japanese culture from a young age, from Japanese food to the music to the anime.

“A friend of mine did a similar English teaching abroad program in the country of Taiwan and informed us that many Asian countries had similar programs,” he said. “We found out JET was a thing and my wife did the application. A few months later we got our placement in Kobe.”

Baquero, 31, whose wife is a high school ALT, did not have many expectations about Japan, but knew it was a place where he would have to relearn how to live in a new environment.

“I LOVE IT HERE. It’s great. A year and a half later and I’m still learning new things about this city, I’m still learning new things about the country, and I’m still making new friends wherever I go,” he said.

Family Adventures

When the **Mongcopas** have time together, they spend it being active. He is a practitioner of martial arts, and his favorite Japanese movies are *47 Ronin* and *The Last Samurai*. Because gyms are very expensive, Mongcopa teaches his son how to box and to grapple with the punching and kicking mitts he has. He also works out with Cathy, who is an elementary school ALT adviser, doing boxing, kickboxing, crossfit and weightlifting.

“We used to be very active at home. We used to do cross fit and kickboxing. But here, it’s very expensive [to join a gym],” he said.

As a family, they have traveled around the Kansai area to Kyoto, Nara, Osaka. This past July, they went home to the Philippines for a short vacation to “go back to the roots and recharge”.

The Mongcopas intend to stay in Japan for a long time. He said overall Japan is nice, clean, and disciplined. His family appreciates the social services—their son’s medical care is basically free. “When we go to the hospital for a checkup it only costs around four dollars, total, for consultation and medicine. And me, because I am under Catherine’s insurance, it is 30% off. So it is very nice here.” He added, “The streets are very safe at night. The kids can walk on their own relatively safe. Nobody bothers them. It’s a very nice place—that’s why we are planning to stay here for a long, long time.”

The **Baqueros** visited Japan in 2016 for their honeymoon, a wedding gift from his father who travels worldwide for business.

“Tokyo was, at the time, amazing. It was our first experience being in Japan. We had to learn how to navigate the subways. We had to learn how to go around the city. We didn’t go on any guided tours or any events; we did everything in the city on our own,” he said. “And so we essentially had to learn how to navigate the city and we were quite successful at it. We would find somewhere we wanted to go, and within an hour we were able to get there with minimal help from the locals.”

With his partner, they like to explore new parts of Japan, sing karaoke with their friends, and explore the city of Kobe itself. Though not set in stone, they have plans to visit Okinawa when it is safe to travel again.

“We have been to Kyoto, Hokkaido, Osaka, and Wakayama. By far, Hokkaido was my favorite,” he said. “The food in Hokkaido was unparalleled; while Japanese food was always my favorite type of food, Hokkaido seems to have the best Japanese food.”

Franmar Mongcopa

A Typical Day

Each day, **Mongcopa** wakes up at 6:30a.m. to prepare lunch for Cathy and himself. He makes sure his son is off to school, and then he takes four trains to get to Rokko Island. At work, he makes desserts for the next few days and prepares cookies for 400 people each day. He leaves work at around 3p.m. and boards the trains again; “I need to be on time because my son finishes his school at 2:45p.m., but then he has afterschool care, *gakudō* (学童), which we are paying for so that I can work an extra hour,” he said. “Because we are here in Japan, there’s no day off, even if it’s your day off, you need to do something.”

On his days off, **Baquero** takes care of the housework and then spends time practicing music and streaming various games on Twitch. On the plane back to visit family in America, he watched the movie *Bohemian Rhapsody*, which sparked in him the desire to seek out a band, which he had not played in for a year.

“Finding a band was, thankfully, relatively easy for me. I used a website called OURSOUNDS that matches musicians looking to start bands with other musicians in the area. Within two days of making my profile, I had an audition to be a singer for a *Red Hot Chili Peppers* cover band in Osaka.”

So far, *Scar Tissue*, the name of the band Baquero joined, has performed in Kobe twice and Osaka once. All players in the band except Baquero are Japanese.

“The shows were fantastic! In America I was a bass player in a band for seven years and would only sing backup vocals very sparingly,” he said. “I was apprehensive about performing as a singer as I don't consider my voice to be necessarily that great. But I discovered that my love for performing outweighs my anxiety about whether or not I'm a good singer.”

Marc Baquero

Working Life

For the past few years, **Mongcopa** has worked as a baker for a second-party food provider at Canadian Academy on Rokko Island. He bakes chocolate cookies, breads, pizza, brownies, cookies, and other desserts for the students and staff.

“My favorite part of the job is constantly learning new techniques in baking and making bread,” he said. They accept cake orders from parents, so he has also learned to work with fondant. His entry into this job was through an assistant chef friend from their church who told Mongcopa about an available position. First, he worked as a dishwasher, but when there was an opening for a baker-in-training, he applied for it.

“It’s so far-fetched: certified teacher [in the Philippines] but baker here [in Japan],” he said. “Sometimes I bring [my family] cookies or chocolate cakes. Sometimes pizza. My wife—she’s the true baker. She bakes cakes at home, and cookies and cupcakes, so I let her taste to see if it’s up to her standards. I’m getting tips from her.”

Each of **Baquero’s** days are typically different as he works part-time for an *eikaiwa* or an English learning center. His very first job in Japan actually found him after he posted his resume on Gaijin Pot. They wanted to interview him immediately, but he would not be in the country for a few more weeks.

“After I moved here, I reached back out to them for an interview. They met with me and I was hired on the spot,” he said. “I have been very fortunate as it has come to my attention that it is much harder for other people to find employment in similar circumstances as mine.”

At his first position, he typically taught seven lessons a day on multiple days of the week with only a five minutes break between each class to prepare for the next. He said it was quite normal for him to go into work, have 10 minutes to set up the first class and then not get a true break until it was time to leave.

“When I first started with my first company, I would teach students as young as 6 months old, to 53, my oldest student being 53,” he said. “My current job, as early as 6 months to 1 year, but now the age limit is 13 years old for our program.”

In America, Baquero worked in the sales industry and held multiple jobs as a sales representative. Jumping to education was a transition for him.

“For better or worse, teaching English in Japan is less about having an educational background and more about being comfortable and energetic in front of a classroom,” he said. “I had always had a natural inclination for performing and that, more than anything, has made my transition from sales to teaching in Japan extremely successful.”

Baquero enjoys that his eikaiwa work allows him to travel to different parts of Japan that he did not know existed. Though Baquero works for a different company, he is still friends with the first manager who reached out to him.

“He invited me and my wife to spend a weekend with him and his family in his native city of Sapporo in Hokkaido. We spent New Year’s Eve and New Year's day in Hokkaido with his family. It was one of the best vacations my wife and I have ever had.”

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Chasing Goals

Mongcopa's goal is to get a full-time job, but he is still looking for a company to sponsor him for a visa. Each day he scours websites for a teaching job, but many of them require Japanese speaking skill.

"I can speak a little. I can understand a little bit. When they talk really fast, like a native to a native, you're like 'すみません (excuse me)?'," he said. "I really cannot get it anymore. It's too fast. You say one thing and they think you're native level."

Another goal is to obtain a Japanese driving license. He said there is an ALT company that will loan a car to its employees so they can drive to the further schools in the rural areas.

"I miss teaching, especially the junior high and the senior kids. I miss it," he said. "Although I still love my job as a baker. I have no complaints. You can put me anywhere. I used to be a garbageman in England. I used to do a lot of stuff. So I'm used to anything. Throw anything at me, and I'll do it with a smile, no worries. But still I would love to go back to teaching."

Baquero came to Japan with the goal of establishing friendships. The couple assumed they would be placed in *inaka* (countryside), and went in with the mindset of finding a place in the community. In the city, making friends can still be a challenge because of the language barrier.

"I never let being nervous stop me from at least making the attempt. I know plenty of people who have better Japanese speaking skills than I do but still talk to Japanese people less than I do," he said. "I have been invited into the homes of a few Japanese friends. I was taught how to make miso soup by a friend and her mother. I have joined a band since coming to Japan. And my very first Japanese teacher came to one of our very first live performances," he said.

In April of 2019, Baquero was inducted into the Kobe PR Ambassadors program. Ambassadors are sent on excursions through the city and charged with promoting tourism through their personal social media pages. He applied for the program because it seemed like a good way for him to learn about the city and to share his love for Kobe with his friends and family back home.

"The ambassador program has given me some truly memorable experiences such as meeting the mayor of Kobe, picking grapes off the Kobe winery vineyard and hiking through the Futatabi Mountains where the Kobe lights [shine]," he said. "All of these being experiences I would not have had had I not been a part of the Kobe PR Ambassador Program."

Photo: from free stocks on Unsplash.com

Commitment

For families thinking about making a big move to Japan, **Mongcopa** said first and foremost they have to be very sure that they are willing to give up their regular job, their comfortable life and to be 150 percent sure as a family that they want to be in another country for years.

“It’s not easy. You leave your friends, you leave your family, so both of you, the husband and the wife, should both decide on it and also consider if you have kids, consider the kids’ future. Will you stay there for a couple of years?” he said. “Both of the couple should decide their goals: if you’re going to stay here for the rest of their lives or just to test the waters.”

For him and his wife, they don’t see the sense of going back at this point, their son has acclimated to Japanese schools, and he speaks English and Japanese but not Filipino. Also, Mongcopa said it will be difficult to find another job back home when you have been away for so long. But just because it may be difficult, does not mean a family should not try moving.

“If life gives you lemons, you make iced tea. Go for it!

Do your best in everything that’s always my motto,” he said. “We thank the Lord for giving us the opportunity to be here. We thank God for everything, the ups and the downs. We’re happy.”

While here, **Baquero** plans to continue learning the language, make as many Japanese friends as possible, and to explore as much of the country as possible.

“Living in Japan has been a truly awesome experience I never thought I would have. It's been the adventure of a lifetime and continues to be so,” he said. “While it is very hard sometimes to go grocery shopping with the language barrier, the success of accomplishing even the smallest goals, such as buying flour or yeast, yields incredibly satisfying results. My time in Japan is something I will always treasure.”

Baquero arrived in Japan just a few days after his wife, and was fortunate to have a few kind senpai JETs volunteer to help him get his life started. When the new dependents arrived this past summer, he returned the favor by taking them on tours of the neighborhood and city. He advises all dependents to come with their spouses as early as possible. For those on the fence about making the big move, Baquero advises them to come. He knows it may be difficult to find work, but he still recommends taking the leap.

“Working in Japan has been one of the most unexpected, greatest joys in my life. And it allows me to have unique experiences of my own, which I could then invite my spouse to join in on,” Baquero said.

Baquero is a second-year ALT from America in the great port city of Kobe. She can often be found in a coffee shop either reading, writing, drawing, or studying Japanese. After playing rugby at university and graduate school, she was excited to finally attend the Rugby World Cup.

Photo: from Unsplash.com

A LIFE AFTER JET

Laura Pollacco (Kanagawa 2017-2019)

Life after JET is different for everybody. For some, JET is almost like a working gap year and after having had a jolly good time, we go back to our countries, pursuing further studies or a job that may have no relation to what we did in Japan at all. For others, JET becomes something that opens our eyes to careers we didn't even know existed, some choosing to stay and work in Japan, unable to leave, and others taking what we have learnt and putting it to use back home. Sarah Parsons is one ex-JET who really took to heart some of the key principles of the JET programme—connection, communication, and cultural understanding—and has created a career out of them, working in trans-cultural business and education.

We hear about reverse culture shock, and after recently finishing on the JET Programme myself, I understand how confusing it can be to have spent so much time in a country, learnt so much, and to have that desire to continue to be connected in some way, but not quite knowing how. So I reached out to Sarah to ask her some questions about her own experiences and what advice she might have to those, such as myself, who still want to stay in touch with Japan. During the coronavirus social distancing here in the UK, we agreed to Skype one another, both in our bedrooms, to talk about what life after JET has been like for her; how she used her time on JET to her advantage to create a business, lecture at universities, become head of the JETAA UK and even meeting the Japanese Emperor.

Q: After graduating in 1995 from the University of Warwick with a degree in Business and German, you applied to the JET Programme. What made you want to apply to JET in the first place?

A: The honest answer was that I didn't know what to do because I lived in Germany for a year and I wanted to travel and work overseas, and I saw an advert at a career fair for a free business class flight to Japan! That's the honest answer. This is back in 1995 when they flew JETs out in business class. So I saw that, and I thought, “oh wow.” And that was the first exposure I had to Japan!

Q: What was life like being placed in Gunma? Did you often visit Tokyo?

A: No I didn't actually visit Tokyo much, because it was a strange part of my life where I was a bit overwhelmed by everything and I wanted to spend more time in my community. I found Tokyo overwhelming. Because I was in a small town, I didn't have lots of JETs around me so I spent more time in the community. I ended up teaching a few local ladies, doing night classes. I played bassoon in a local orchestra as well and I also spent a lot of time with my teacher’s family. It actually got to the point where it was a bit too much. I appreciate it now a lot but at the time I remember being a bit exhausted. I got a lot out of it. It’s good to have these experiences and I feel like it was hard to get bored. Living in the inaka I didn't get bored, but they gave me a car so that was good; I travelled around a lot visiting other JETs.

Q: After JET, you worked for the Japan Local Government Centre in London. How did you find that job? Was it through JET?

A: It wasn't specifically through JET. When I got back, again, I didn't know what to do. I travelled through Italy and then I got back and signed up for JETAA. Years ago, when you signed up (to JETAA) you got a monthly newsletter called 'Jetlag' that had Japan-related jobs in it. I saw an advert for a Japan-related job. I just needed to be back in touch with it, because everyone I was talking to had no idea about Japan. This was a while ago so they didn't know as much about Japan as we do now, so they wouldn't have had a clue what I was talking about! I was really desperate to get that back, because I felt like I had this amazing experience but I couldn't relate to anybody. Even within my family, no one could really relate to my experience even though my dad and sister had visited me in Japan, so when I saw this job, I had to go for it. Because I had been on the JET programme, I probably had an edge over the other candidates because they wanted to have someone who understood the Japanese mentality to work with the Japanese expatriates in the office.

When I got down to London, I also got involved in JETAA London. We were very active and we got involved with the Japanese Embassy and Ambassador and we had a fantastic time. For me it was the perfect situation because I was having a mini Japanese experience in London and I was actually a lot more sociable and met many more JETs through that than I had in Japan! And it was great. It was a nice job. I was helping the Japanese out whilst learning more about the Japanese business culture, I was a PA to the director and they were really nice and treated me really well. And then I got pregnant.

JETAA Committee

Q: So that was when you decided to move again. At what point did you start teaching and working in universities?

A: I moved back up to the Midlands to raise my family, and then I went into teaching. I trained to be a primary school teacher. I did that for a few years and then I started my business, originally called 'Japan in Perspective,' now called 'East West Interface,' and I started going into a few universities to do a little lecturing and they were happy for me to do that, because I had business experience, but also because I have a teaching qualification. So I started to lecture on cross-cultural communications and now I am a Senior Teaching Fellow and SOAS (School of Asian Studies University of London) and The University of Sheffield specialising in Japanese and Korean Business & Management and also have taught some Business in China.

Q: Along with the lecturing and the business, you also became the chair of JETAA UK and worked with a few Japanese cultural societies. How did you find juggling all those things?

A: I really wanted to get involved with JETAA again because I had been so active in the London chapter when I got back from Japan, and it was very exciting, so coming back to it in 2012 was the right thing for me. As Chair of JETAA UK I got involved with all the big cultural organisations in London. It was really good networking for my business so at the time it wasn't so much juggling; it was something that I wanted to do to get that exposure and continue being involved with Japan in the UK. I wasn't getting paid, as it was voluntary.

Obviously, I wasn't pushing my business, I wasn't allowed to do that, but I made a lot of good contacts. For example I got to meet the ex-JET head of HR of a major Japanese company through networking and have delivered their European management for the last 3 years. I obviously didn't just get the work handed to me because I was a JET, but it's a fantastic professional network to be involved in. I did also get involved in the Japan Society and was on their Board of Trustees for 3 years. I recently just resigned from their Funding Committee, as I gave a lot of time to it and it was all voluntary.

I got so much out of my experiences with JETAA: trips to Japan, I got to meet the current Emperor and Empress, I had dinner with the Japanese Prime Minister and had lunch with his wife when she visited London, I co-organised and hosted an event at the Houses of Parliament alongside the British Japanese Parliamentary Group and although it was great, a lot of work went into it, so that's what prompted me to step down, as I needed to concentrate on running my own business and lecturing.

With Akie Abe

Q: But from that work, you received a Commendation from the Japanese Ambassador to the UK. How was that?

A: It was amazing, it was so lovely because two years prior, five male ex-JETs received a commendation for their work for JETAA, which made me feel a little deflated, but other people I know behind the scenes and staff at the Embassy advocated for me to receive the award. And I've met the Ambassador having done many speeches alongside him and visited his residence to meet Princess Takamado so it was lovely to finally get recognition from him, and listen to his heartfelt speech about me. The event was made even more special as my kids came and I got a beautiful brooch designed by the Ambassador with the flowers of Japan and the UK on it.

Q: We understand that Japan has some issues when it comes to gender equality, and viewing women as being as capable as men. Seeing as you are still working closely with the Japanese and also conducting research into the gender roles in Japan, have you found that sexism is an issue even whilst working in the UK?

A: I understand the hierarchies and gendered differences within Japan and that the status of Japanese women is still much lower than the Japanese man within the workplace and as a western woman, I am given more elevation than Japanese women are and I do sometimes take advantage of that. However there is still the assumption that if a man is talking and he is higher ranking, then his voice and opinion takes precedent. On occasions where I have had to have meetings with high ranking Japanese officials and dignitaries, I have found men, even western men, try to talk over me even if I am the host. Once we received a present for JETAA and the Japanese minister couldn't look at me, he gave it to a male colleague because he just couldn't get his head around the fact that I was in charge.

I have also been called “美魔女” (*bimajo*, beauty witch) a term coined for a woman who is beautiful over a certain age. This man was calling me this in a restaurant in London and I just had to laugh along because there is not much you can do against these stereotypes and I know that it wasn’t meant as an offensive term. It can be difficult though treading that fine line between respecting and understanding a culture and wanting to call out the sexism and low levels of gender equality and for the most part, I have been treated with respect by my Japanese male colleagues.

Q: What current goals are you working towards within your company?

A: With my company I am looking towards developing online courses, which now is the perfect time for. I already deliver online cross-cultural communications courses and am developing a course on gender in business, alongside doing a lot of gender research. I'm actually writing a book chapter on the gender roles in Japan and I am writing a lot about *kawaii* in there.

Now it's not just Japan for me, as I am looking to work with China as well, as it’s explaining those cross-cultural distinctions. It's not just etiquette, it's about communications and how you approach negotiations and how you motivate staff and how to get good PR. Now I am looking to work more widely, so that’s a goal, to widen the net, and to make some really creative courses. I'm a musician and I was about to roll-out (well, before coronavirus) a training course looking at leadership and music at universities with the students. For me, my goals are to be more flexible, creative and innovative.

Q: We have lots of things to help us with careers after JET, but what would you say to JETs looking to go down a similar path to yours, wanting to use their knowledge of Japan, but not really sure how?

A: Definitely get involved in things like JETAA, in the UK there are regional groups as well. Getting a job, so I got one at CLAIR, it wasn't well paid, but getting that job was great as I had that experience of how the Japanese work, and their business culture. I understand that people are a bit more entrepreneurial these days, and there are a lot more younger people wanting to start their own business which is great, but if you want to work with the Japanese, they want to see experience and that you know what you are talking about. You have to show knowledge, that's why I've done a lot of lecturing. But there are so many more opportunities now than when I came back. I see a lot of JETs coming back to London, and jumping into things and being a lot more entrepreneurial, but for me I would say get as much experience as you can with the Japanese if you want to continue working with them, as even if you aren't in Japan you still have to deal with that mindset.

The JET experience is unique, and you get so much from it, but you don't get so much of the skills to apply in the workplace if you want to start a business, so you have to be patient and learn that. There is now so much more interest from the UK at least towards Japan, it's crazy. In terms of what is happening right now in regards to the coronavirus, we have no idea where things will be in regards to the economy and our relationship with Japan after this and Brexit. It's just going to be very interesting to see. I suppose people could look at their wider skills of having that knowledge of cross cultural communications.

Also a lot of people think ‘oh, I have to speak fluent Japanese’ but the biggest secret about me is that I don't speak totally fluent Japanese! I have a Level 2 Japanese Language Proficiency certificate, from literally studying and getting help from people in my office, but I don’t use it in my job all the time. So unless you want to work in Japan, you don't have to have it. Be more creative as well, a lot of people think ‘I want to work for a Japanese company!’ Well there are a lot of variations and lots of companies working with Japan. Get experience and be open. The best skill you can have at this time is to be flexible.

If you are interested in Sarah Parsons and would like to know more about her work visit her website.

Laura Pollacco was a Kanagawa JET from 2017-2019 and former ***CONNECT*** *Style and Beauty Editor. She is back in the UK to pursue her love of acting but will also be working on her Japanese and ensuring she doesn't lose touch with everything she learnt in Japan; once she gets out of lockdown that is.*

images from vecteezy.com

IF YOU CAN'T FIND

FIND YOU

From the bustle of Tokyo, to the calm of Okinawa

Angus Anderson (Tokyo)

Let me preface this story by telling you, I am from a place filled with gorgeous beaches and nature called Tasmania. Anyway, I currently live in Tokyo, a place not well known for its beaches or multitudes of natural attractions. After travelling to the "beaches" nearest to Tokyo, Zushi and Kamakura, I was still feeling unsatisfied. It was then I realised that there was one particular place in Japan that could not only fulfil my craving for a true beach but could also scratch an itch that I had held for many, many years. This is where the diamond blue waters of Okinawa came into the fray.

To me, Okinawa has always been a place I wanted to visit, the *pièce de résistance* of Japan. Combining not only amazing nature and beaches, but also the relaxed, friendly vibe of the people who inhabit Okinawa. So, on a whim, I suggested Okinawa to my friends, one of whom had the chance to go in the past but was swiftly crushed after an expired International Driver's Permit (IDP) stopped her in her tracks. So, with literally no fixed agenda, we booked our flights, booked a car, made a rough plan, booked the hotels and then finally got on the bus to Narita Airport.

Arriving into Naha was like taking a step into an alternate reality. I felt like I had taken a step into a hybrid of Thailand, Northern Australia, America and Japan. The trip began as a bit of a blur, getting in and locating our car. Once we got the car, the trip truly began, with Naha now fully on display. While Okinawa is relatively small, Naha felt like a small metropolis taken from along the Chuo Line. The streets still littered with neon, *conbini* and *izakayas*.

However, once truly in the thick of the Naha neighbourhood, we were blessed with one of the best parts of Okinawa, the cuisine. Okinawa is famous for a variety of food and drinks, especially the replacements for the staples of izakayas. *Umibudo* or "sea grapes" are a common sight in Okinawa, a salty ball of goodness. Like most other prefectures, Okinawa also has its own soba. My friend and I dove straight into the food and both of our dreams of eating awesome food were met.

Umibudo or Sea Grapes

Okinawan Soba with a slice of *san-mai niku* (Pork Belly)

The remnants of Shuri Castle

Churaumi Aquariu

Following on from our adventures in Naha, we travelled the entire island trying to get to every bucket list spot. We ticked off as many as we could, including the recently destroyed Shuri Castle. We began by travelling to lookouts along the west coast of the island, before arriving at our stay on Sesoko Island. After a day of driving, the next day was spent at Churaumi Aquarium. The aquarium allows you to get up-close and personal with whale sharks, as well as manta rays. It also features lots of different areas, including a large pool where dolphins perform.

Before heading south, we decided to head to Kouri Island, where the famous Heart Rock resides. The island features an ocean tower, which gives you a 360-degree view of the surrounding islands. On our way to Okinawa City, we had to make a stop in at the famous Okinawan ice creamery chain, Blue Seal, with both of us opting for Okinawan exclusives of *shiikuwasha* (a type of citrus fruit) and *beni imo* (Okinawan purple sweet potato).

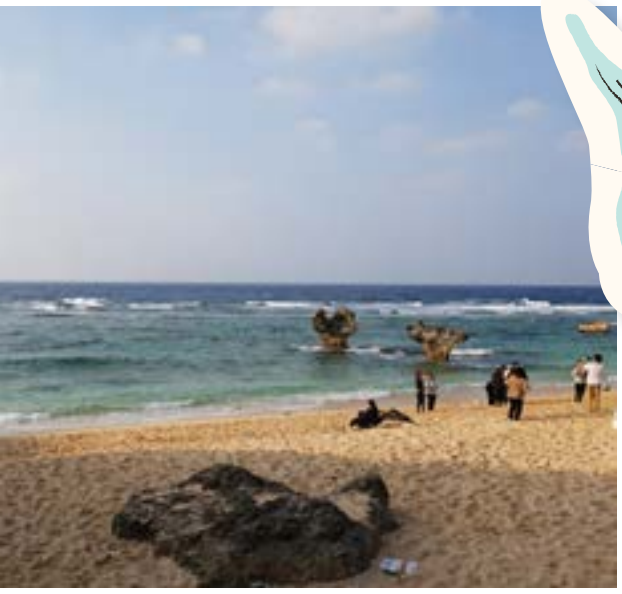
In Okinawa City, we finally fulfilled a long-time dream of mine and one of the reasons I came—snorkelling. We found a tour that not only included snorkelling but also kayaking—an awesome package for the cheap price. The day began with us kayaking through the mangroves, a first for my travel companion. Following on from this, I finally got what I wanted, swimming in crystal clear water amongst brightly coloured fish. Compared to beaches in my adopted area, Okinawa provided me with a slice of home.

He

Finally, we headed to Itoman before our final day back in Naha. On our way south, we stopped at a very sobering place, the Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial. While we arrived too late to see inside, walking past the names of people who were lost in the war showed the true effect of war on this island. The memorial is located on a gorgeous coast, where all 47 prefectures pay homage. After exploring the site, we hopped in the car and headed for our

um

The Peace Memorial's Coastal View



art Rock on Kouri Island

nal night/day in Naha.

fter we woke in that morning, we had some reakfast and then headed to a beach close o the car rental, giving us one last gorgeous iew. Of all the places I have been around the orld, Okinawa will always be one of the best, ombining Japanese culture with a relaxed, each-centred lifestyle usually seen elsewhere. great place for a busy Tokyoite to take a noment for themselves.

Okinawa Peace Memorial

Vector images from Vecteezy.com

Angus is a first-year JET living in West Tokyo. Arriving in the big smoke from the small Australian state capital of Hobart, he is a food lover who loves to find the best meal in his locale. Follow him on Instagram @gus_ando

TOP FIVE THINGS TO DO IN OKINAWA

that aren't the Beach

Hannah Moore (Okinawa)

While Okinawa's beaches are certainly beautiful, there is a lot more to love about these little islands. Before Okinawa was annexed by Japan, it was known as the Ryukyu kingdom and it has its own vibrant culture to show for it! From the bright colours of the traditional *kimono* dying technique *bingata* to the dynamism of the traditional dance *eisa*, the oceans aren't the only things that sparkle here!

1. EISA

Surrounded by bass drums sending ripples through your body and the dynamic moves of the acrobatic *shime daiko* players, eisa is my top pick for things to experience while in Okinawa. This originated as a dance to welcome the ancestors during Okinawan *Obon*, it is now danced all year round and at a number of dedicated festivals all over Okinawa. Traditionally this was a man's dance, and though now it is also performed by women it retains its power and dynamic athleticism. My top pick of places to see it is the All Island Eisa Festival in Okinawa city. You can grab an Orion, the beer that screams Okinawan pride, at the adjoining beerfest. The atmosphere is warm and exciting and you will see some great dancers! Just make sure to pace those beers, it's easy to get dehydrated in the hot, humid Okinawan summer!

Honourable mentions to see eisa include the 10,000 Eisa Dancers Parade, community groups during Obon itself, and Okinawa World.

2. PEACE PARK AND PEACE MEMORIAL

Going to this museum was an extremely powerful and moving experience for me. Okinawa's history has been a painful one but at this museum the story is told with such a delicate sensitivity that you never feel as though they are descending into sensationalism, but neither do they turn away from the painful truth. It expertly treads this line in an incredibly informative way.

After the sobering experience of the museum itself, take some time to heal in the beautiful grounds. Various Japanese prefectural representatives have donated sculptures that blend beautifully with the natural beauty and rich greenery of the cliffside location. The overwhelming message of this museum about war is one of peace and I find it conveys that with a deep sincerity that will leave you feeling better for having come.

3. GO DRINKING IN SAKAEMACHI

Okinawa is known almost as fondly for its people as it is for its beaches and you will find them equally warm and inviting. For those of you not lucky enough to experience living here you will definitely want to visit a place where you can mix with the locals. I recommend the drinking district Sakaemachi. In the heart of Naha, walking distance from tourist hub Kokusai Dori, you will find arcades and alleys filled with tiny *izakaya* bursting with life. The drinks are fairly cheap here and it's compact, perfect for a night of bar hopping. On some walls you may see a *sanshin*, the quintessential Okinawan instrument, and if you are lucky someone will play. Watch the people around you so you can join in the *hayashi* or repeated chorus of the song and let out a "Ha-i-ya!" with everyone else. Check out my handy guide to Okinawan phrases you can use while out on the town to impress the locals and they will instantly warm to you!

Okinawan phrases that can be used out on the town for instant rapport

Haisai (***Haitai*** for females) - a common greeting, use it morning, night, whenever!
Nifēdēbiru - thank you
Kwachīsabira - The Okinawan equivalent of *itadakimasu*, use it at the beginning of a meal or if someone offers you some food
Kwachīsabitan - Past tense of *kwachīsabira* roughly means *gochisosama deshita*. Use this at the end of a meal or to thank someone for paying for your drinks ;)
Māsān - delicious
Churakāgī - This means a beautiful person, typically a woman. Use it wisely!
Watamicchon - My personal favourite phrase may not be known by some younger Okinawans but it's worth trying just to get the reaction when they do! It means I am really full, or really satisfied. Use it at the end of a meal to express your satisfaction with the food and get some satisfying double takes from the people around you!

4. BINGATA DYEING

If you are a creative person like me and like to intersperse your sightseeing with a bit of getting your hands dirty you can't beat bingata for a craft you can do in a day and love the result. This traditional dyeing technique is way too expensive for me to pay someone else to do it, but at Shuri Ryusen, you can receive a small square and do it yourself! The great thing about this is it's a relief dying style, so the stencil pattern will have already been put on by someone who knows what they are doing, you just have to use the dyes to apply the colour. Deciding how to blend and balance your colours is just the right amount of engaging but relaxing for a travel activity.

If you want to make a whole day of it you can try Ryukyu village instead. Here there are a series of traditional Okinawan houses each with a different craft for you to try as well as performances, fresh fruits, juices and stalls where you can buy traditional crafts.

5. RUINS OF KATSUREN CASTLE

In a recent tragic fire, Okinawa's most iconic castle, Shuri Castle, was sadly burnt to the ground. Though the gardens surrounding the ruin are also lovely, I would also recommend heading out to the ruins of Katsuren Castle to get your fix of castle spotting. Though only the walls remain they look beautiful against the lush grass and like the stronghold of any self-respecting lord they have been built high on a hill overlooking some stunning ocean views. The hill is a bit steep but it's not a long walk and on the way you can enjoy the augmented reality through QR codes which allow you to use your phone's camera to see little scenes of ancient life superimposed onto the ruins. Though you may not need pictures to learn as I do, I have found some castles provide you with an obtuse wall of English, translated a little too literally from the Japanese. This was a welcome change!

These ruins are accessible by bus from the main island hub, Naha, and are a nice way to get out of the city if you aren't renting a car to visit the unspoilt North. However, I always recommend visitors to Okinawa's main island rent a car for at least some of their stay if possible.

Hannah Moore spent three life-changing years teaching English in Okinawa where she fell in love with the local instrument, sanshin. Now back in her home country of Australia, she continues her sanshin journey as the founder and creative director of Okinawan music group Sanshin Sydney, maintaining close ties to the Okinawan community in Sydney and back in Okinawa. Follow on Instagram to show your support for her and her group's continuing mission of cultural exchange!

Photos: Hannah Moore and Teruya Kiyoshi

Discovering the Ainu i

'Twas the season for welcome parties, and the Eastern HAJET welcome event just so happened to be in Akan, a place I had wanted to visit since I got here. Home to the Ainu Kotan, a village of the indigenous Ainu people of Hokkaido, Akan sits tucked away in a national park, and the town itself boasts beautiful views over its lake and nearby volcano. I had read about the Ainu during a day of pre-arrival Hokkaido research, and as a lover of cultures and languages, I hoped I could learn quite a bit by visiting. It seemed fitting, considering the Ainu have left their touch on the island, that I should do some investigating.

The itinerary said we were going to be staying at the campsite nestled in the trees and across from the lake. The campsite sat directly across the street from the Kotan, which meant we would be able to hear the music over the speakers from there. Camping sounded like a great idea, except I didn't own a tent or a sleeping bag. I managed to swing a tent from the organizer of the event and decided I would just make a bed roll instead of buying a sleeping bag. A thin comforter, my patch blanket, and a pillow, and I could sleep in sweatpants and a hoodie. Surely that would be warm enough? (Spoiler alert: it wasn't.) I hitched a ride with two other local JETs, and headed out at around 8:00 on Saturday morning, as we were coming from *central* Hokkaido, and this shindig was happening in *eastern* Hokkaido. Four and a half hours of drive time laid before us—not factoring in the stops for breakfast—so our gracious driver popped in some tunes and we headed off.

Birch Trees at Akankohan Campsite

The drive over was almost as striking as the pictures of Akan itself. I was initially worried about keeping from boredom on the ride over, but being from a relatively flat area of Texas, the mountain ranges and dramatic river drop-offs

in Akan

Krystin Pickering (Hokkaido)

took my breath away. I kept my face glued to the window like a child for most of the trip. Coming from our town, we had to pass through Furano and loop around the outside of Daisetsuzan National Park before we reached the edges of Akan National Park. Mount Asahidake was visible for most of the journey, towering over its neighbours and the endless farm plots. At least part of it was visible until we hit the forest of Akan National Park where we lost it to the birch trees. I wish I had taken pictures, but I couldn't stop gawking out the window.

We arrived in Akancho at around 13:00, dropped off the car, and set up camp at Akankohan campground. Nestled in what I can only describe as a birch grove, we were greeted by the music of the wind rustling through the leaves. Tent secured, I got settled to the tune of the Ainu music playing from the Kotan. Once everyone was finished, we decided to check out the lake vistas and Mount Akan itself. It was a pleasant walk through town to reach the ferry boat docks, which turned about to be one of the best places to take pictures. Every shot looked like a postcard. It was the first volcano I had ever seen up close, and my inner child cheered upon recognition of the caldera at the top.

Mt. Akan over Lake Akan

Nature itch scratched, we headed back up to explore the Kotan in greater detail. The first thing I noticed was how the recorded music filled the space and seemed to work with the sound of the wind through the trees rather than against it. The songs featured their famous single-stringed instrument,

the *mukkuri*, and though we weren't fortunate enough to catch a dance, I imagine it would be incredible. I've heard it said in jest that the Ainu must have invented club music, because the rhythmic plucking of the mukkuri resembles what I can only describe as rustic techno. A rather intimidating statute of an owl welcomed us into the square which was lined with shops. Each one boasted handcrafted items with Ainu patterns or animal motifs. Several sold rather impressive wood crafts, along with some smaller leather and metal-worked items. Were suitcase restrictions not a barrier, I found quite a few things that would have looked great in my future living room, but alas, those two 23 kilogram bags weren't quite enough.

While perusing a wall filled with fabrics printed with a pattern that I was told helped to ward off evil spirits, I spotted a flier for a place called "Between the Bread" on the stand. I leaned down to look, since after five and a half months in Japan the idea of a good sandwich was enticing to me, and I spotted the Holy Grail of items listed on the front—Lake Akan *crawfish* sandwich. Be still, my beating Cajun heart. We absolutely made the hike back down to the ferry docks to Between the Bread. Boy, it was absolutely worth the trip! The crawfish were wonderfully cooked, coated in a lightly spiced mayonnaise-based sauce, nestled on a bed of crisp lettuce, and all wrapped up in a buttery toasted bun. Hats off to the owners. I hope it's there for years to come.

Since no campout is complete without a cookout, the welcome crew had taken over the kitchens to serve up some chili to help keep us warm after sunset. Even in the warmer months, Hokkaido still managed to hit us with a chill most nights. My Singaporean counterpart and I quickly wrapped up in our blankets and scarves. Our driver was still wandering around in a T-shirt like a madman. The chill set in well once the chili was gone, and we made a break for the foot onsen on site. You know when you get in the shower cold, and the water

feels almost scalding to just your toes? Yeah, that was what the onsen was like. Took me a good thirty minutes of just my heels floating in and letting the steam warm my toes before I could finally put my feet in. It was worth the wait though. How many ALTs can you fit in a small foot onsen? Apparently, 20, most of whom cracked open a *biru* and let the steam warm us up.

Morning came early, and though I normally detest the sun, I was happy to feel its warmth after a cold night. Definitely should have bought a sleeping bag. We broke camp and headed out toward home, but not before making a stop at a nearby natural hot spring. This particular onsen had been recommended to us by a kind local man at the foot onsen the previous night. We pulled into the parking lot of the Meakan Hot Spring, named for mountain behind it. It reeked of sulphur, which meant it had to be the real deal. And boy, it was. Volcanoes are hot, y'all. We weren't in very long since the water was so toasty, but soaking down into a natural spring at the base of a volcano in the middle of a birch forest? Worth it.

Our trip to Akan unleashed an even greater curiosity for the Ainu people. They have left their fingerprint across the island, from their language in the names of towns, to holy sites dedicated to the *kamuy* (divine being), and to events and festivals. I hope to find ways to learn more and interact with the memory of the original inhabitants of Hokkaido. There are still so many Ainu sites for me to explore, but Akan was a great place to start.

Krystin is entering her second year as an ALT in Hokkaido, stationed in Takikawa City. Originally from a small town near Houston, Texas, she has enjoyed the frigid weather and craggy landscapes of Hokkaido. A first-generation graduate, she majored in biology and minored in French, and she decided to take Japanese during her final year. She now wishes she had taken better note in Japanese class.

JAPAN'S NORTHERNMOST IRISH PUB

Luke McCartney (Hokkaido)

Photo: Jonas Jacobsson on Unsplash.com

It can take anywhere from 15 to 25 hours to fly from Dublin International Airport to Tokyo Narita Airport. On top of that, you need to take an additional 1.5-hour flight from Tokyo Narita Airport to Kushiro Airport and then a final 30-minute bus ride in order to reach Kushiro City centre. This is an idealised route of course, and not the one I would be destined to take. My travel plans involved a quick stop at Sapporo, which is found on the complete opposite side of Hokkaido to Kushiro. Instead of a 30-minute bus ride, I enjoyed a five-hour train ride through Hokkaido's rugged terrain. The realisation of how far home or anything familiar was, began to set in. I was nervous.

I come from Ireland. A uniquely simple country which is quickly overlooked on the world stage. Our island is not a particularly big place—we're actually only a little larger than Hokkaido. Our population isn't anything to shout about, currently sitting at around six million and steadily increasing. Ireland does not try to take centre front on the world stage, nor does Ireland export large amounts of TV, music or movies. Many people in Japan do not know a great deal about my country or people. Yet for unusual reasons, Irish people and Irish communities can be found everywhere.

Irish people have a very long history of migrating to other countries—it is something we have done for centuries. On occasion, it's not been a choice but rather a forced solution to desperate circumstances. Because of this, you can find aspects of Irish culture all over the world—even in some of the least expected places. I'm proud to be part of this long tradition of ours, to join the many Irish around the world who are living and working in other cultures.

I, of course, knew I was going to Kushiro long before boarding my flight. As any modern person would do, I immediately turned to Google, Facebook and YouTube to learn as much as I could about my new home before arriving. In my down time at my job in Ireland, I would walk the streets of Kushiro through Google Street View. I quickly discovered where the restaurants were, which bars looked like fun and various other places I would like to visit. Looking back, it was only a matter of time until I randomly stumbled upon a pub, but not just any pub, an Irish Pub. It was unmistakable, it was in the very name, IRISH PUB COY.

The pub itself makes no bones about its lack of conformity with Japanese style. The building emanates a western influence with clearly placed Irish symbols all over the display windows. If you can't read the English name, then these symbols might help clarify this unusual place.

Upon entering, you won't find an *izakaya* or anything resembling a typical Japanese drinking spot. Instead, this pub has been carefully designed and decorated to resemble a western pub style. Tables and chairs in a jumble around the room, a low hanging ceiling with strong wooden beams running across the top and walls covered in Irish memorabilia. With the lights dimmed low, you might be forgiven for walking into a chair or two. But fear not, the bright shining light of the bar will guide your way and behind it is the unmistakable symbol every Irish person knows—the golden harp on the black beer

Kazumi-san of Irish Pub Coy

Kazumi-san of Hot Sauce

tap. They say home is where the Guinness is, and upon entering this pub, I find it hard to disagree.

Behind the bar you won't find an Irish person, but a Japanese national. Don't let that fool you, however, as each one has a strong connection to the island of Ireland. For example, Kazumi is a fisherman by trade, but winter is a harsh season so he compensates by working in the pub. Fishermen and pubs have a strong connection, whether in Ireland or Japan it seems. Furthermore, he has actually been! With great enthusiasm, he has told me of his trips to Ireland, his love of Guinness, and has even shared with me some Irish humour.

Over friendly conversation, it becomes too easy to start ordering drinks and food. If beer isn't to your taste, then perhaps the numerous Irish whiskies that this bar offers may be of some help. The bar staff have all shown a personal knowledge of each whiskey and are more than happy to offer recommendations should it come to it.

Western style food can be difficult to come by in Japan. Often it comes with the catch of being inspired by the West but edited to fit a Japanese palate. Irish Pub Coy is not immune to this process and its food shows a clear Japanese orientation. It can be hard to see this as a negative, however, as under this roof, Japanese residents and foreigners like yours truly both enjoy the same tastes. A little bit of Ireland and a little bit of Japan mixed into each dish. A humbling reminder of how far away Ireland is.

Between sips of beer and enjoying western style food you can listen to some Irish-inspired music. I have been told by staff that the band playing are a Japanese group who felt so inspired by Irish music they dedicated their time recreating it. This pub seems to act as a middle ground in many respects. For Japanese customers, it can be seen as an attempt to experience the unusual but for us foreigners, it acts potentially as a way to experience the little of the familiar.

With friendly staff and familiar drinks and food, I'm glad that Irish Pub Coy is in Kushiro City.

LUKE'S KUSHIRO RECOMMENDATIONS

If the Irish Pub Coy isn't quite to your taste, then why not try another personal favourite of mine, Hot Sauce Jazz Bar? Walking into Hot Sauce reveals a large and expansive restaurant floor. A wonderfully decorated bar running along the kitchen front with a DJ turntable to the left. The small DJ set isn't just for decoration either, looking past the set you will see a wall stacked thick with music records. The ever-present owner, a different Kazumi-san, is always on hand to indulge a request and will happily talk music.

Do you want to know where the best burgers in Kushiro are? Well, I'll tell you. Eureka SouthAve Kushiro is hands down the best spot for a good western style burger. The young burger shop owner draws heavy influence from the West with a particular love of America. This is evident in the cosy one-room restaurant—western beer, western posters, and western music but most importantly all the essential western ingredients for a good burger. A simplistic menu promises quality over quantity and this place delivers on that promise every time.

Coming from Ireland but living in Kushiro, Luke spends his time trying to eat all the scary looking food and enjoying all the drinks—the names of which he cannot pronounce. Having lived abroad before, he understands the rules of getting settled. Finding ways to feel like a local is important when moving to a new place and Luke has been endeavouring to do so. Fortunately, an opportunity to share his discoveries has arisen through ***CONNECT*** *so others can enjoy these things too. Catch up with Luke on Instagram @lukemccart*

Photo: Charlotte Coetzee

CONTRIBUTING TO CONNECT

CONNECT is a magazine for the community in Japan, by the community in Japan. Everyone is welcome to write, no matter your experience or style! If you have an idea you want to see in these pages, reach out to our Head Editor, or any of our awesome section editors. We'll work with you to make it the best it can be and share it with our audience of thousands. Not every article needs to be an essay! We feature interviews, infographics, top-ten lists, recipes, photo spreads, travelogues, and more.

Contact the Head Editor of *CONNECT*, Alice Ridley, at connect.editor@ajet.net with your submissions, comments, and questions.

ARTICLES

Write about something you're doing. Write about something you love. Tell us a story.

SPOTLIGHT

Tell us about someone in your community who's doing something neat and noteworthy. Cooks, collectors, calligraphers—we want to hear about the inspiring people around you.

COMMENTS

Let us know what you think. Interact with us on Facebook, Twitter, and issuu.com.

PHOTOS

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

HAIKU

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

COMICS

You asked for it, and now *CONNECT* features comics. Whether you're a desk doodler or a published artist, we want to see your panels and strips about life in Japan.

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