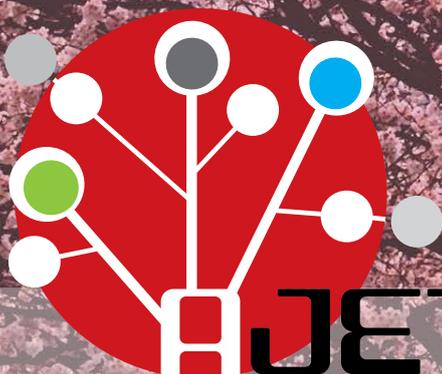


AJET

CONNECT

magazine
April Issue
2014





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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR OF CONNECT MAGAZINE!

Hello everyone, and welcome to the second-to-last issue of Connect before the summer break! We know you all have been busy with graduation, end-of-the-year parties, goodbyes, and spring traveling, so we appreciate you taking the time to read through our magazine. Special thanks, as always, goes out to our ever-changing, always-talented monthly contributors. The April issue saw more than 30 members of our community contributing their stories, photos, haiku, and more. See someone you know? Give them a little love via your social network of choice (or, if you're feeling crazy, call them or see them in person).

Interested in contributing to Connect? Want to stay abreast of our updates, requests, and openings? Just want to be on the inside? You can join our Connect Contributors Circle on Google Groups by clicking the button below or send me an email at connect.editor@ajet.net.



The April issue sees a lot of great stories about readers involved in their community and making the most of their time in Japan. You can read about Anthony Lieven, who was funded by his town to produce a full-scale film using actors from his schools and neighborhood, or about Maggie Hill, who fell in love with the martial art of aikido, finding it as a way to connect beyond the language barrier with the people she spars with. There's also stories from several big-hearted people who sought to give back to the communities they visited while traveling abroad.

I absolutely believe that being involved with your community beyond the school day is the best way to get the most out of your experience here. It's the best way to make memories, and to

be remembered. I think the things we do outside the classroom are the things which will have the biggest impact in the long run, both on the Japanese people we meet and on ourselves. Even if the thing you get involved in is a school sports club, you'll find that the difference in communication and the level of interest is astounding. Students, teachers, and others who may be reticent to speak to you in a formal setting will open up once in a different atmosphere and talking about something that interests them.

With the language and culture barrier, it can be difficult sometimes to have "real" conversations with the people we see everyday, but my absolute favorite moments in Japan are those moments where my interactions stop being "foreigner to native" and become "person to person." Remember, the "E" in JET doesn't stand for "English," it stands for "Exchange." Even if you're not a JET participant, one of the most valuable things any of us can do as members of an international community is to close the gap between countries, break down the barriers piece-by-piece, and connect with people on a real level.

To bring everything around, that's what Connect magazine is all about. We hope to inspire you, while celebrating the things that people are doing to be a part of this country beyond just a foreigner-for-hire. So, as spring begins and new school years start, make an effort to be a part of something new. We're all ears.

All my best,

Steven Thompson
3rd-year Fukushima ALT, Head Editor of Connect magazine

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Top 3 Prefectures: Community Service Hours*

1. Saga - 294 hours (48 JETs)
2. Yamagata - 243.5 hours (81 JETs)
3. Tokushima - 129 hours (82 JETs)

*Charity Money raised and Community Service Hours are recorded by using this form [HERE](#). Did you recently hold a charity event or volunteer for any organization? Then fill out this form! Let's show how much impact JETs are making. Get involved!

FROM THE AJET CHAIR, KAY MAKISHI...



Dear Fellow JETs,

Happy new Japanese fiscal year! This is a time where what I like to call the "staff shuffle" happens. Whether your favorite teacher left or your archenemy got transferred to your section, just remember it's all part of making your JET experience that much richer.

Regardless of your school or office situation, your AJET National Council is non-stop hard at work volunteering our extra hours to bring the best services to you—the national JET community—National AJET.

Speaking of services, remember those AJET surveys we asked you to fill out last autumn then went to discuss the results with the Japanese government and CLAIR last December? Well, together, we were able to have our voices heard at a national level:

Japan Times published an article revealing The JET Programme's lack of disaster preparation. The article was written based on data from the AJET surveys and reports—your answers, your voice. Read the full JT article [here](#).

And just a few weeks ago in March, CLAIR announced a new "Multilingual Living Information" smartphone app including an earthquake warning function! This news makes me so happy to see proactive measures taken by the Japanese government to ensure the safety of us JETs. If you haven't already downloaded the app, I totally recommend it. Learn more about it [here](#).

In other news, this past month, the new AJET National Council for 2014-2015 was elected. Thank you again to all who got involved by casting your vote. Remember, the National Council is just a group of JETs from all over Japan who are passionate about making the JET community better. If you're keen about making a positive difference, enjoy working with motivated peers, and have a heart for service, perhaps consider running next year. It's never too early to start stepping up to the plate and getting more involved! See who your upcoming community

leaders will be **here**.

On a personal note, my dad is in Japan after 30 years visiting me here in Fukuoka. He spent 18 years in Okinawa, 10 years in Tokyo, then 30 years in Pennsylvania (my hometown). Even though he's originally from Japan (has a US passport now though), and speaks fluent Japanese, it's interesting to see all the culture shocks he's going through. The vending machines selling soup, how nice customer service are, all the weird snacks in the grocery store, and more. Showing him the ropes allows me to sort of experience Japan for my first time, too. It's refreshing. And it allows me to live a bit more consciously because, you know, after a while you get used to things. Even if you don't get a chance to be a tour guide in your town, try to imagine walking through the streets like you've never walked down them before and be humbled by the fact that you're living in a foreign country. Japan! Something most people will never get to do in their lives!

And we, your AJET National Council, are here to help make our experience in this country the best it can be! As usual, I'm always open to any feedback, comments, or a friendly email saying 'hi'!

Yours in service,

Kay Makishi
Chair, AJET National Council
3rd-year Fukuoka CIR

meet the CONNECT team!



Steven Thompson Head Editor

After a long, but "totally radical" winter traveling between the slopes of northern Japan, it seems like spring really is making its way here. I'm going to chase the remaining snow that I can find by visiting some late season mountains before settling back into the new school year. I'm excited, since the average age of my office is dropping, with new teachers younger than yours truly are entering the staff room come April 7th. I hope that things are equally exciting and full of opportunity for you, as spring brings new life in many different ways. Are some new ideas or stories blooming in your head? Share them with us at connect.editor@ajet.net.

Melinda Lange Layout and Design

Spring is gearing up to go full swing! Pretty soon there will be *hanami* parties with friends, special food everywhere, beautiful greenery, and hay fever out the wazoo. For those of us with allergies, the wonders of spring's warmer weather are best enjoyed from underneath a mask. The mask makes us strong and brave! Suddenly, our love for the outdoors and beautiful flowers by far outweighs that tingling feeling on the tips of our noses. Don't let the pollen get to ya' and enjoy the sakura trees!



Josiah David Director of Public Relations

Sakura season is always bittersweet for me. It means friendly drinks under the flowers with my closest friends, but it also means rubbing two yen together close to payday. Thankfully, this season was mostly sweet as I welcomed a new puppy into my home, Charlie Chaplin, the Corgi!



Sterling Diesel Assistant Designer

It's getting absolutely beautiful down here in Kyushu. With every change of season, I'm making the most of what it has to offer. Since it's now spring, I'm making candied cherry blossoms and pickling the leftovers to put on soba and in rice in the future. Aside from that, I'm doing plenty of road trips to onsen in Nagasaki and Saga. I just love seeing everything in bloom on weekend rides!



Ola Weber Copyediting

This April you'll find me wandering the streets of Seoul, hunting down Korea's famed *hotteok*. It's a little late in the season for this delightful winter street food, but I've still made it my goal to track down every single type—for variety's sake, I swear. Back in Japan, I'll also be on an equally important mission: extending my list of sampled sakura sweets. Food obsessed? Guilty as charged.



Matthew Jones Culture Editor

I had a quick look through my photos for this month, and it turns out that I don't have a single photo of just me and a load of beautiful *sakura* blossoms. Hence the shot of me surrounded by the closest substitute I can find—some of Nagasaki's flamingos. This *hanami* season, make sure not to just take photos of sakura, but to actually *star* in some too!



Tom Morin-Robinson Entertainment Editor

With April comes the end of the school year and the long-awaited spring vacation. Feeling ripe for adventure, I decided that it is never too early to tick off major bucket list boxes and rode the Trans-Siberian express from China, through Mongolia and finally on to Moscow. Fifteen days, three countries, and a whole load of vodka made for some pretty interesting photos. Check them out at tommrphoto.tumblr.com. And as always, if you find yourself with a story in need of telling, get in touch at connect.entertainment@ajet.net!

Lineng Tee Fashion & Beauty Editor

I never liked pink until I came to the land of *kawaii*. Then I saw the plum blossoms, cherry blossoms, peach blossoms and pink moss in Yamanashi, and fell for prettily-packaged beauty buys, *sakura* seasonal specials and good old Hello Kitty. Like many, I'll be spending April saying hello and goodbye to friends and colleagues, heading out for hikes, levelling up on my Japanese, and trying to capture the ephemeral beauty of those fragile blooms. Send me your most magical memories at connect.fashion@ajet.net!



Ariane Bobiash Food Editor

Greetings everyone! March and April mean traveling for a lot of JETs. I myself went back to Indonesia over the school break, and am finalizing travel plans for Golden Week. I'm thinking of Taiwan, so if anyone has any tips, hit me up! What are your travel and eating plans for the season? If you have any mind-blowing food experiences while abroad—or in Japan!—we want to hear about 'em! Let us know at connect.food@ajet.net

Xan Wetherall Food Editor

April! The best month of all! Here comes *hanami*, with plenty of new sake to try, lots of fresh, first-run green tea, and a cornucopia of shoots and baby buds to whip into a mountain veggie tempura! Of course, it's also my birthday month, but we mustn't brag! Okay, so I'm totally into April. The showers bring the flowers in May, which bring all the fruits for the rest of the year, and summer's peaking over the horizon! It's time to dig in to the season, folks! Raise your glass, *kampai*, and tell me what you're drinking at connect.food@ajet.net!



Hugo Dragonetti Sports Editor

Down here in Kyushu at least, the cherry blossoms have gone and the bugs have arrived—but with the start of another school year and the J1 League season well under way, I'm feeling good. I'm looking forward to bonding with new students and teachers through club activities at school and catching a few more of Sagan Tosu's home games. If there's something sporty that's keeping you active, please feel free to share it. connect.sports@ajet.net

Caroline Bellinger Travel Editor

Apparently, it's spring. However, as I sit here typing this under my *kotatsu*, while flurries begin to dance over last night's 30cm snow dump outside, I think perhaps spring didn't get the memo. I am a winter girl at heart, sure, but it would be nice to feel my toes again. Just once. Hopefully, by the time you are reading this, the big thaw has happened and the cherry trees are beginning to burst into colour. Spring is surely Japan's time to shine—so, this month, be sure to check out some of the secret *hanami* spots we featured in last month's issue.



Michelle Castro Volunteering Editor

It is finally starting to get warm and I busted out of my *kotatsu* cave to go bike riding. I went for a two-day bike ride in Oita prefecture. I rode 140km. and embrace the rain, hail, and head wind that the weather gods gifted me with. The event raised over 738,505 yen for relief in the Philippines. This weekend I am headed to a *hanami* event in the city of Unnan in Shimane prefecture. Before that I will go rowing in Lake Shinji to practice for an upcoming regatta.

Kelly Merks Events Editor

April kicked off with an oh-crap-we're-leaving-Japan-soon-and-have-too-much-to-see whirlwind vacation to Nara, Kobe, Naoshima, and Hiroshima. My husband and I are fortunate enough to have stayed with some good friends along the way, though I wish we had checked out AJET's Tatami Timeshare instead of staying in hostels the rest of the time. We're missing our local AJET's *hanami* shindig, but get to enjoy plenty on our travels! April also means—strangely—the start of "Oktoberfest season" in Tokyo, so I'm sure we will be going to the year's first one in Akihabara for some Bavarian-style Japanese brews. What's up where you are? Tell me at connect.events@ajet.net.



Staff

Head Editor

Steven Thompson

Graphic Design and Layout

Melinda Lange

Section Editors

Caroline Bellinger

Ariane Bobiash

Michelle Castro

Hugo Dragonetti

Matthew Jones

Kelly Merks

Tom Morin-Robinson

Lineng Tee

Xan Wetherall

Assistant Designer

Sterling Diesel

Director of Corporate Advertising

Aaron Gilling

Director of Public Relations

Josiah David

Copyediting

Ola Weber

Contributors

Patrick Alexander

Dan Ayres

Jess Bertubin

Lindsey Black

Christopher Carlsen

Aimee Wenyue Chen

Kira Conley

Penny Fox

Jessie Giddens

Maggie Hill

Amanda Horton

Marika Jackson

Sara Kissick-Skeel

Scott Kominkiewicz

Karen Lam

Eden Law

Anthony Lieven

Natalie Liverant

Chris Low

Amanda Lynn Marcroft

Larissa Milo-Dale

Casey Mochel

Jessica Perl

Rachael Ragalye

Rachel Roberts

Natalie Toombs

Verity Townshend

Christian William

Cover Photo

Sophie Patterson

Additional Photos

API AJET

Jess Bertubin

Kyle Buck

Catrina Caira

Adam Carter

FanPop

IMDb

Yuri Ishihara

Scott Kawaguchi

Hannah Killoh

Sara Kissick-Skeel

Allison Morris

Sophie Patterson

Eriko Takano

Kayla Whitney

The Wikimedia Foundation

Laurel Williams

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Haiku

Jess Bertubin

Christopher Carlsen

Terry Dassow

From the Editor	1
From the AJET Chair	3
Meet the Connect Team	4
Ask/Connect	8
Reader Poll	9
AJET's Winter Opinion Exchange	10
JQ Magazine: JQ&A With Matthew Cook of the Osaka Prefectural Board of Education	12

CULTURE

Editorial: This is a Man's World	14
Spotlight: Mikey Newton, Compassionate Poetry Collaborator	15
A World of Dreams: Exploring the Takarazuka Revue	16
Misasa's Aspiring Auteur	18
Weddings in Japan: An Overview	20

ENTERTAINMENT

Review: Michael Arias's <i>Tekkon Kinkreet</i>	22
Spotlight: Patrick Alexander, Classroom Cartoonist	23
Tokyo's Hash House Harriers	24
Tongue-Deaf #1: A Foreign Ear on Japanese Music	27

FASHION

Editorial: What to Wear for Weddings	28
Spotlight: Chloe Wooding, Master of Kimono and All Things Japan	29
Japanese Wedding Fashion 101	30
Gotta Catch 'Em All: The Search for Affordable Kimono	34

FOOD

Editorial: Wedding Food in Japan	36
Spotlight: Erika Ehren, Cooking for a Cause	37
Too Much Love Cookie Bars	38
Pickle Paradise	40

SPORTS

Editorial: The Case for Cycling	42
Spotlight: Christopher Carlsen, Zen Master of Shingo Night Basketball	43
Brazilian Jiu Jitsu: Losing to Win	44
Aikido: Kicking Butt in the Name of Love	46
36 Hours at Rusutsu Resort: Snowboarding in Hokkaido	48

TRAVEL

Editorial: The MH370 Mystery	50
Spotlight: Yamagata's New Shinkansen Foot Onsen	51
Compassionate Travel	52
From Hakodate With Love	56

VOLUNTEERING

Update on JETs Rally for Tohoku Fundraiser	58
Spotlight: Nominations!	59
The Fukushima ALT Blood Drive	60
Hokkaido English Challenge	62

EVENTS

Editorial: Staying On—JETs in Fukushima	64
Spotlight: TEDxFukuoka JET Volunteers	65
What About JEF?	66
Events Calendar	70

CONTRIBUTING

Contributors Map	74
Contribute to Connect!	75
Photos and Haiku	76
Connect Comics	79
Flashback: Students' Pop Culture	80



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This edition, and all past editions of AJET Connect, can be found online at <http://ajet.net/ajet-connect>. Read Connect online and follow us at <http://issuu.com/ajetconnect>.



ASK / CONNECT

Make your **voice** heard in the pages of **Connect magazine!**

Do you have a question about workplace etiquette? Did you go to an event we highlighted? Want to comment on last month's articles or editorials? Just feel the overwhelming need to tell our editors how much you love and appreciate them? Each month we'll print and respond to your questions, comments, and witty observations right here.

Click the **button below** to get **Connect-ed!**

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CONNECT



READERS' POLL

Every month, we'll ask you guys what you think about various topics and questions submitted by members of the AJET community. You can find the results for last month's question, and this month's question here!

Cast your vote and add your voice at ajet.net. You can also submit your own idea for a poll topic at connect.editor@ajet.net!

This Month's Question

Magical, omnipresent, wonderful, and so very...convenient. Living in Japan, it's hard not to marvel at the mighty conbini. Found on every corner, and seeming to carry everything you could possibly need at 3 in the morning, the Japanese convenience store is one thing many of us will miss after leaving Japan. The question is, which will you miss the most? **We want to know: what's your favorite convenience store?**

- 7/11
- Family Mart
- Lawson
- Mini Stop
- Daily Yamazaki
- Circle K (Sunkus)
- Local/Other (tell us!)

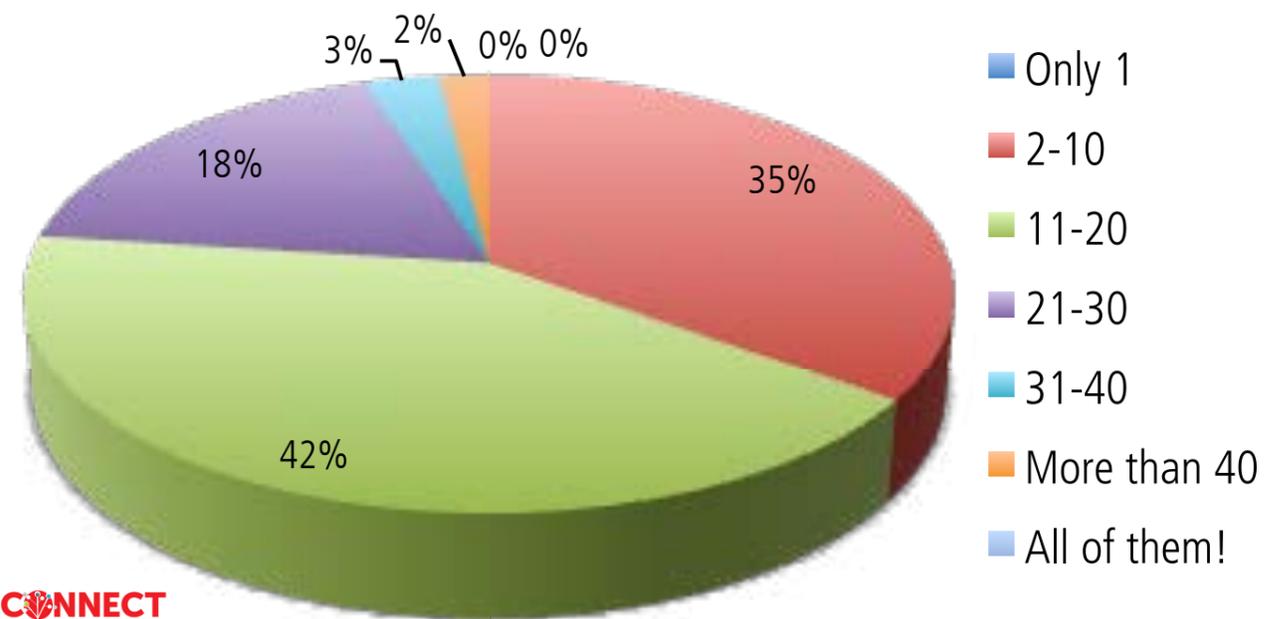
VOTE HERE!

What did you think of this issue? Have a question of your own? Email us at connect.editor@ajet.net in response to this month's articles and editorials!

Last Month's Results



Well, aren't you a well-traveled bunch! It looks like most of you have been to at least 10 different prefectures (and a few of you have been to more than 40!). Never forget about how widespread and strong the network of the community can be, whether you need a floor to sleep on or are just looking for someone to karaoke with you while you're away from home! Reach out to the **Block Representatives** for advice, recommendations, and help whenever you need it.





WINTER OPINION EXCHANGE

Penny Fox, Saga

On December 16th last year, members of the AJET National Council met with representatives from the 3 ministries that oversee the JET Programme (MIC, MOFA & MEXT) and CLAIR for an opinion exchange meeting (OE). As noted by Mr. Shirasaki, the Managing Director of CLAIR, there are a lot of changes underway in relation to the JET Programme at the moment. These recent announcements, detailed below, are great news for the Programme and its participants. In this context, these types of opinion exchange meetings are more important than ever.

This year's OE was conducted in a more open format, with less pre-prepared responses than in the past. This led to a fruitful and productive discussion between all parties. I've summarized it here, but a more detailed run-down, including more about the changes in the AJET-CLAIR relationship, can be found on the [AJET website](#).

First discussed was the **JET Involvement in Communities Report**, MIC and CLAIR acknowledged the need to build stronger connections between JETs and their workplace and community. MIC is currently considering the idea of an English-speaking Japanese coordinator in schools who could communicate with ALTs and help link them better with their schools and community. CLAIR also agreed to consider what they could do in terms of providing more information about community involvement opportunities pre-departure. AJET will also strive to help JETs by using prefectural JET websites and AJET Block groups to relay relevant information.

With regards to **Disaster Awareness and Preparedness** among JETs, CLAIR is looking to trial a new safety confirmation system in the near future, but would like to remind all JETs that **in the event of an emergency or disaster they should**

call their supervisor at their contracting organisation in the first instance. In addition, the ministries, CLAIR and AJET will strive to raise awareness and work to ensure that all foreign residents are connected to disaster-related information and training opportunities.

In response to the **Life After JET report**, all parties present acknowledged that it is very important for JETs to maintain ties to Japan after their have finished the Programme. As such, it seems a good idea to strengthen ties between current JETs and JETAA chapters around the world, with the aim of connecting JETs with a professional network and specific employment opportunities in their home countries. AJET has already been working to establish greater links with JETAA and collaborate on projects over the past year and will continue to do so.

In other discussion, MEXT confirmed some details for the new reforms to education, which will be rolled out in 2020. Specifically, English education at elementary school will begin in the 3rd and 4th grade with 'foreign language activities', while English in the 5th and 6th grades will become an official subject, taught in 3 lessons per week. What does this mean for JETs? MEXT says they value the role that ALTs play in the classroom and will be looking for help and support as they roll out this new program. In addition to encouraging the ongoing use of team-teaching, MEXT is also considering that suitably trained and qualified ALTs could become more of a main resource in the classroom; potentially teaching some classes on their own.

Stay tuned for more updates in the future, and have your say on this and other important issues in the upcoming **spring survey**. Make your voice count for the next Opinion Exchange, and we'll do our very best to represent you in Tokyo.

10



Members of the AJET Council, CLAIR, and the Three Ministries.



Checking information on documents and phones during the discussions

CONNECT
April Issue 2014



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This piece originally appeared on JETwit.com on February 15, 2014. It has been edited to fit the magazine. The full interview can be read here.

As a JET Programme success story, that of Matthew Cook (Osaka, 2007-12) must surely rank as being one of the most extraordinary and inspiring. Hailing from Blacksburg, Virginia in the U.S., Matthew's interest in Japanese martial arts led to his participation on JET. Beginning a five-year tenure as an in Osaka ALT, he also served as the AJET National Council Chair, working with the Japanese government as well as JET alumni associations, international corporations, and news media about the value of the Programme and internationalization. In 2012, after his JET tenure ended, he was hired by the Osaka Prefectural Board of Education as their Native English Teacher

(NET) Program Coordinator, and in the following year, became a senior staff member appointed to the revolutionary English Education Reform Project—and as far as anyone knows, a first for a foreign-born, former JET to be appointed to a senior government role in education.

Now almost a year after his **historic appointment**, Matthew generously took some time out of his packed schedule to talk with JQ about his role, and most interestingly of all, provide some frank opinions about the JET Programme and the state and future of English education in Japan.

First of all, let me just say, congratulations on your achievement. In a nutshell, how did you go from being an ALT to a senior staff position at the Osaka Prefectural Board of Education? Is that something you could have imagined doing when you first arrived as a JET in 2007?

Thank you very much. It's been a whirlwind, these past few years, and the congratulations are appreciated. However, we believe the real work is just beginning now. During my time as a JET, I had the unique opportunity to develop my own curriculum and methodology, teaching junior high and elementary school students. I taught phonics part of a methodology, with the goal of extensive reading. I also had the honor being the AJET National Council Chair my final year on JET. That experience opened a lot of doors, allowing me to meet some influential people that I may not have been able to meet otherwise.

One of those people was Toru Nakahara, who was named the superintendent of the Osaka Prefectural Board of Education on April 1 of last year. He holds the strong belief that English education has been a failure in Japan, and wants to reform the system altogether. He was one of the first people to take my opinions and experiences seriously, and believed that I could use them to play a key role in the reformation of English education in Osaka. Because of that, I got the chance to interview for a position on his special "English Reform Project Team," fondly referred to as the "Seven Samurai."



Mr. Cook in his office



Matthew Cook receiving his appointment

It's something I never would have dreamed of in 2007. In fact, I didn't have any idea what I was getting into when I arrived as a JET, or if I would even be here longer than a couple of years. However, working for the future of these children, and trying to give them more opportunities in their future, has become my greatest personal accomplishment and given my life new meaning.

It's been close to a year since your appointment. What are the challenges you've faced and how did you deal with them? Did your experiences as a JET prepare you for these challenges?

Two of the biggest challenges we've faced are budget and human resources. There are lots of great ideas out there regarding English as a foreign language. The reality is, writing education policy for one million students is a lot more complicated and intricate. It just isn't as simple as having a great idea, when there are so many factors, on so many different levels, at play.

One of our main projects is developing curricula for elementary school English language education. As many readers well know, English teachers are not [yet] budgeted and allocated for the elementary schools in Japan. Finding ways to enable schools to teach English without certified English teachers, technology, or budgets has certainly been an obstacle that requires some innovative thinking and ideas.

I think my experience as a JET certainly did help me, especially my tenure as AJET Chair and our other volunteer ventures here in Osaka. Operating on an almost non-existent budget can challenge you to think about things outside of the box, to find new ways to approach issues and think about what's really necessary to accomplish the goals you've set in front of you. I've always encouraged the JET community to get out and get involved in their communities, not only for philanthropic purposes, but partly because it's great for developing your own personal skill sets and experiences for the future.

Last year the LDP announced their intention to double the number of JETs in three years. What challenges do you think this will bring?

The stated purpose of this doubling is to improve English proficiency in Japan. I think this shows what is a continued, and profound, misunderstanding of the JET Programme's goals and track record. While the JET Programme has done great things for internationalization in Japan, it's hard to see any tangible, measurable effect on English education. For this reason, I feel that doubling down on a programme for "ALTs" (that are already

widely questioned for their ability to affect English education) without reforms and changes to that programme is not a good idea. This "doubling down" definitely has the potential to negatively affect the JET Programme instead of helping matters. This could bring out the naysayers who state that the programme is a failure, because it hasn't proven to help or change English education.

On the other hand, if the entities that oversee the JET Programme were serious about making real, sincere changes, it could propel the programme into the 21st century. In my opinion, to give the JET Programme the "teeth" to change English education, the Ministry of Education needs to seriously recruit teachers with ESL experience and backgrounds. These teachers need to have a desire to teach English as a career, be given special licenses to teach by the ministry and be given real responsibilities in schools, instead of being peripheral staff that are often left feeling like long-term guests.

On top of that, any serious effort to teach English needs to be backed by making it an official subject in elementary schools, starting from first grade. The rhetoric I hear at this stage is still far from being sincere, and is on a timeline that allows other countries in the region to continue outpacing Japan at an exponential pace.

If these types of changes were introduced, and JETs were strategically placed to teach these lessons in elementary schools, I've no doubt there would be a profound change in English education that could be directly linked to JET, and ensure its stability for decades to come. Here in Osaka, we're taking steps toward doing exactly this: English education from first grade, not "foreign language activities." Licensing special teachers with the needed experience and proficiency. And most importantly, a strategic methodology for teaching English for communication and proficiency, not for taking entrance exams. It is my sincere hope that our efforts will inspire leaders in Tokyo to do the same.

Lastly, here's a random: where do you see yourself in five years?

Specifically, I don't know. Especially considering that I had no idea I'd be here five years ago. More generally, I think you'll find me fighting the good fight: trying to give our children better opportunities and experiences than those who came before them.

Find Matthew on Twitter (@Cooksensei) and Facebook. He also has a blog at <http://cooksensei.com>. For more JQ magazine interviews, click [here](#).

CULTURE

EDITORIAL This is a Man's World

Recently, I got to talking with one of my friends about the little annoyances of being a foreigner in Japan. During the conversation, she said that she would rather be foreign, than a woman in Japan. Naturally, this made me curious, and she pointed out the various ways that, despite recent efforts, Japan can still be called a sexist country. I took a look at the facts and was surprised by what I found.

The scale of female marginalization in Japan is quite difficult to grasp. If you ever go to a meeting, whether in your school principal's office or the local town office, you will be waited upon by women. The receptionist will be female, complete with a cheery grin and offering an enthusiastic greeting. During the meeting, if you are served tea, it will be by a woman. There are reports of women attaining master's degrees from prestigious universities, only to be consigned to the role of a glorified tea lady.

A shockingly low figure of 67% of college educated females are currently employed, with many of those being in part time, or low prestige positions, like the tea ladies mentioned before. An even lower estimate of 7% occupy senior positions. In 2011, government reports showed that 0.8% of town and village mayors were women.¹

The Center for Talent Innovation reported that 63% of the women surveyed said that they quit their job because the work was not satisfying, or that they were pushed off the career track.²

Last September, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe spoke before the UN General Assembly. In his speech he spoke about the scale of Japan's gender divide and how it would be necessary for Japan to move forward.

"Creating an environment in which women find it comfortable to work, and enhancing opportunities for women to work and to

be active in society, is no longer a matter of choice for Japan.... It is instead a matter of the greatest urgency."

Abe's Liberal Democratic Party however, does not have the best track record with increasing female participation in higher levels of the administration. After the LDP took power in 2012, the percentage of female policy-makers in the Lower House of the Japanese Parliament decreased to 8%. With this decline, Japan slid to number 124 out of 188 countries surveyed by the Inter-parliamentary Union for gender equality in politics.¹

The reality of discrimination in the workplace is often cited as one reason why increasing numbers of Japanese women are refusing to settle down to family life. Since having a child essentially pauses or completely stops a professional woman's career in its tracks. This, in turn, is negatively impacting Japan's birth rate. Estimates project that the Japanese population may fall off dramatically in the next 50 years, with a 30% decrease in total population forecast by 2060.

In order to overcome this issue, Japan needs to increase utilization of women, in all areas. Economists speculate that Japan could increase its GDP by a minimum of 5% if they employed women in the same manner as Europe or the U.S. In times like this, where Japan's economy is struggling, and the value of the yen is falling, Abe's government can use all the help it can get.¹

¹ <http://world.time.com/2013/09/30/you-mean-women-deserve-careers-patriarchal-japan-has-breakthrough-moment/>

² <http://ideas.time.com/2013/09/27/whats-holding-japanese-women-back/>

THIS MONTH IN CULTURE...

We have a real doozy for you! What's that you want? Contemporary Japanese affairs? I've got that covered in my editorial, all about sexism in Japan. Get inspired reading the Spotlight on Mikey Newton, an ALT who is doing his part to help out the Tohoku region, from all the way down in Nagasaki.

Do you want to learn about Japan's interesting showbiz scene? Check out Verity Townsend's article on Takarazuka. If you want some ALT action, look no further than Anthony Lieven's piece on making a movie in Japan.

Finally, if you need something to rest your little head after all that content, check out my guide to Japanese wedding culture, it's wedding season after all, and you don't want to be unprepared should that invite come.



SPOTLIGHT

Mikey Newton, Compassionate Poetry Collaborator

Last month, you will all have noted the moment's silence for the victims of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami. It has been over three years since the tragedy, and yet, the victims are still struggling to move on. However, several intrepid ALTs are helping out in any way they can.

Mikey Newton, in Nagasaki City is one of these ALTs. Coming from Baylor University in Texas, Mikey studied under Yuko Prefume, a Japanese professor who is keenly involved in efforts to support the Tohoku region. Her commitment has led her to arrange an annual visit by her students to the region, during which they volunteer for cleanup and repair, or play with children.

Ms. Prefume also directs her students to read a poem in Japanese. The poem: '君たちが歩くとき' by Miyazawa Souji is one of compassion and friendship, both of which have great meaning for the residents of Tohoku. Mikey helped out by encouraging numerous Nagasaki ALTs to join the project, by submitting videos of themselves reading the poem. He later edited all the clips and arranged them seamlessly into a compilation.

The reaction to the video was powerful. Ms. Prefume reported that it had a profound impact on the people watching it in the Minami-Sanriku region. Seeing and hearing people from all over the world wishing them strength and luck, even moved some to tears.



It has been three years since the disaster, but the region is still looking for help and support. So, if you have the ability, please do your part and help out.

You can watch the video [here](#).



A WORLD OF DREAMS: EXPLORING THE TAKARAZUKA REVUE

Verity Townsend, Hyogo



Display of the kind of glittery costumes of ten used in revue finales



The Grand Theatre in Takarazuka - all dressed up for the 100th anniversary



The author at Suzumi Shio's Dinner show in May 2010

On the evening of 26th May 2010, I found myself sitting at one of twelve or so large, white-clothed tables in the main hall of a posh Tokyo hotel, surrounded by Japanese women. Suddenly, the lights dimmed and an air of hushed excitement enveloped the nearby tables. Illuminated by a single spotlight, a tall, stylish figure in a black velvet tailcoat and matching trousers appeared next to the table behind me. She was wearing a fedora low over her eyes, which she tipped mysteriously at members of the audience before beginning to sing in a low voice.

This was Suzumi Shio—who at the time was a rising star in the all-female Takarazuka Revue—making her entrance at a dinner show for her fan club. For those of you who don't quite know what Takarazuka is, the following will attempt to provide you with a glimpse into the glittery, romantic world of this unique and sometimes overlooked Japanese theatrical company.

The story begins in 1913 in the city of Takarazuka, famous for its hot springs. As the city was the last stop on the Hankyu railway line, the president of the company, Kobayashi Ichizou, was looking for another way to attract visitors and boost ticket sales. Inspired by the growing popularity of Western style musicals and revues, he hit upon the idea of creating an all-female theatre troupe as a modern alternative to the traditional, all-male kabuki.

Since its humble beginnings, the Takarazuka Revue has grown and grown. It now comprises five troupes: Hana, Tsuki, Yuki, Hoshi and Sora (or Flower, Moon, Snow, Star and Cosmos respectively), each with around 100 actresses. Every troupe has two top stars—an otokoyaku (male role-player) and a musumeyaku (female role-player)—who play the lead characters in all the big productions. The five troupes are strengthened by the senka, or superior members. These are the older Takarazuka actresses, who don't wish to retire yet and lend their experience to supporting roles.

In order to become a Takarazuka actresses or Takarasiennes, young women aged between 15 and 18 must study for two years at the Takarazuka Music School. The students are divided into otokoyaku and musumeyaku. The girls assigned the role of otokoyaku cut their hair short, learn to sing and speak in a lower register and are taught how to move like a man in order to embody the idealized male character of the Takarazuka stage. Takarasiennes who go on to play female roles also receive intense training to play the

often exaggeratedly feminine musumeyaku characters. As well as lessons in music, dance, drama and various cultural subjects; the first-year pupils must clean the school by hand every morning. This is carried out in a much more painstaking fashion than the souji time at the schools most of us work at.

Competition to enter the Revue is fierce; many of the successful applicants have been studying ballet or singing from a young age. In fact, it is said that it is more difficult to enter the Takarazuka Music School than Japan's elite Tokyo University; each year over one thousand hopefuls apply, but only fifty are accepted to train to become Takarasiennes.

A typical Takarazuka performance consists of a play or musical for the first half and a second act consisting of a revue-style show. The plays range from adaptations of Western musicals (such as Phantom of the Opera), kabuki plays, novels and manga (most famously, The Rose of Versailles). Elaborate sets and beautiful costumes are the norm, and all of these performances make full use of the talents of the actresses; be it an intricately choreographed tango dance, a beautifully sung duet, comic ad-lib or a touching tragedy. The layout of the theatre is also used to make the audience feel closer to the performance; the silver bridge (ginkyō), a narrow strip of the stage that encircles the orchestra pit, is frequently used by the actresses and gives the audience a closer view. Sometimes the actresses enter the audience too; most memorably during the final scene of 2009's 'Gubijin', which featured a large army charging down the aisles towards the defeated hero on the stage.

The revue portion of a performance is usually the most energetic. A typical revue allows the actresses to show off their mastery of various styles of dance and usually features flashier costumes than the play. The grand finale of a large production consists of the entire cast walking down Takarazuka's most famous set piece; the illuminated Grand Staircase (ookaidan), wearing elaborate feathered costumes, which are the most striking aspect of the whole performance. Unlike the first act, the revue part of a show usually doesn't have a story, making it easier to follow, regardless of whether you can understand Japanese.

After every show, many fans attend demachi, during which they line the street outside waiting for their favorite actresses. When a Takarasienne leaves the theatre, the fan club members kneel down, allowing those behind to take pictures of the stars. Each actress will stop before her fan club and exchange a few words while the fans hand her letters and sometimes, expensive gifts.

Fan club members are able to attend the dinner shows and tea parties (ochakai) of their favorite actress. These consist of a song and dance performed in a smaller setting to the theatre, followed by the actress telling anecdotes, discussing her love of a particular food or her interest in a film, and possibly finishing with a meet and greet opportunity.

The stars are accessible yet inaccessible, extraordinary yet ordinary. Takarazuka is often referred to as a 'dream world', and although the term has become somewhat of a cliché synonymous with the Revue, there is no denying that Takarazuka provides a form of escapism into a world of beauty and exoticism where love always triumphs.

This year is the 100th anniversary of the first Takarazuka Revue performance, so there are many popular shows being performed. Performances tend to start at the Grand Theatre in Takarazuka before moving to the Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre a month later.

Last Tycoon, an adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's final novel is currently playing at the Tokyo Theatre until May 11th. This tragic story will be the final show of the Flower Troupe's top star Ranju Tomu. When I saw it in Takarazuka it was beautifully acted and gorgeously costumed. A must see, especially for anyone who likes old school Hollywood glamour.

The Cosmos troupe will also perform The Rose of Versailles—one of Takarazuka's most famous shows. Top star Ouki Kaname will play Oscar, the French noblewoman who is raised as a man and becomes the captain of Marie Antoinette's guard. This runs throughout May in Takarazuka before moving to Tokyo at the end of June.

What if you don't live near Tokyo or Takarazuka? There are national tours of Takarazuka productions which go all around Japan. More information can be found [here](#): and the Japanese [official website](#).

Verity is a 2nd-year ALT in Hyogo Prefecture. She can chatter on for hours about kimono, 60's and 70's Japanese and Indian cinema, and retro videogames.





18 Summer vacation in Misasa, Tottori Prefecture. Aya, a 4th grader at Higashi Elementary School, is taking part in a speech contest at the local onsen. While she meets her friends at school, something mysterious happens on nearby Mount Mitoku: two people are fused together into a monster! Anthony Lieven was there to document the whole thing on camera. This is his story.

Okay, maybe it wasn't as dramatic as that! And that may or may not be the plot of a movie—my movie. Since I was a kid, I have loved cinema, and Japanese cinema in particular. After seeing *Seven Samurai* as a child, I knew that I wanted to be a director. I started making my first short films at around twelve, and carried on in university. After watching Japanese movies and learning Japanese after high school, cinema—among other things—led me to Japan. I had dreamt of traveling to Japan, and always felt that becoming a director was also more of a dream than a real goal.

While I was studying Japanese at a university in Paris, I kept my goals in mind. I was always trying to show my interest in cinema by making short films for my homework and so on. I ended up writing a paper on V-Cinema, or direct-to-video movies, at Kansai University, as part of my Master's year there. During my time at Kansai, I was lucky enough to work with cinema specialists, and also fortunate to meet Takashi Miike, Hiroki Matsukata and Koji Yakusho on the set of *13 Assassins* in Kyoto.

"Kid, you know what? I played in about 150 yakuza movies. When you are a director, call me and we will do a movie together, right?" Mr. Matsukata told me.

Before I graduated, I wrote a second paper dealing with the

metamorphosis in Shinya Tsukamoto's cinema. Tsukamoto is my favorite director on the scene today. His work had a big influence on my own filmmaking.

As soon as I landed here, in Misasa, I started taking pictures and shooting videos with my DSLR. When fall came with its red leaves, I decided to make a short video of Misasa's best spot, Oshika Valley, and post it online (which you can watch [here](#)). When my coworkers saw it they were very pleased and encouraged me to make more videos. I submitted a proposal for a monthly video project to the town office, and received a budget of 100,000 yen to buy a small camcorder. I was ready to go and started the monthly videos in April 2012.

Local media were rapidly interested the films, and featured them in the newspaper and on TV news several times. Feedback from the town office and residents of Misasa was also very positive. They used my work to promote Misasa around the country. For instance, I shot Misasa's scene for the **Tottori version of AKB48's "Fortune Cookie"**. After working on projects like that, I was excited to move on to bigger things, and suggested making a short movie, here in Misasa.

At first I was only joking, but people started to become more and more interested. My boss finally asked me, in late 2012, to write a script, build a project, and submit a budget. To my surprise, with only a few adjustments, the project received the go-ahead. I was free to do what I wanted with the screenplay, and my coworkers helped me with the writing. They gave great advice and corrected Japanese language mistakes. They also had a few requests; mainly about the way we promoted Misasa in the movie.

The main purpose of the movie was to promote Misasa in general, and—more specifically—the 850th anniversary of the discovery of the Misasa Onsen. It also aimed to help Misasa's residents rediscover their hometown and fall in love with it all over again.

The main cast was composed of 4th graders from one of Misasa's elementary schools. I discovered them during their school festival where they performed *rakugo*—a comical story told by a single narrator. They had amazing acting skills for such little kids. Other cast members included people from the town office, local residents, and friends who wanted to join.

Production ran from January to July, since it was difficult to work around everybody's normal work schedule. Most of my own free time was spent making the movie, meeting with the committee, coaching actors on the script, buying props and many other innumerable jobs that go into making a film.

We started filming in August, with the same camcorder I received from the local office. We had only one week—5 days during school hours—with the kids, so the timetable was very tight and difficult to modify. We couldn't spend too long on one scene or do many re-takes. Scenes that didn't involve the kids were shot later. All in all, it took us around three weeks to finish up the filming.

I started editing in early September and then spent about a month making a rough cut. Mistakes started popping up and I faced a lot of problems, both with video and sound, so it took most of the next two months trying to fix everything. It was very difficult, since most of these issues should have been addressed on set, rather than in the editing stage. I couldn't fix everything, but I did my best!

19 While I was working on the editing, I showed a **teaser** during Misasa Town's 60th anniversary ceremony. I also made a 15-minute special video for this event held on November 1st.

Throughout the project, one very difficult thing to manage was the expectations. Many people were involved in the film, so it got a lot of interest. Everybody was expecting a lot from it, so I had to make it right. Which, of course, only increased my stress level! We finally did a full screening on December 14th as part of Misasa's Kodomo Festival in the town's Cultural Center. There were between 300-400 people in attendance. Later, I ran a small screening at a local community center. The film has also been broadcast on a local cable TV (NCN) as a special program around New Year's, and was shown about ten times from January 2nd to 6th!

We did a screening at Tottori College on January 31st during the Tottori JET *chukan kenshu*, and another screening at a community center in February. Another screening took place at the Cultural Center in March, and with the help of a CIR, I intend to arrange one in Kyoto in July. Perhaps in the future, I'd like to try the film at some festivals, broadcast it online, and sell DVDs.

So far, the feedback has been very good and we are talking about making a second movie. If we do, you can expect to be seeing us soon!

Born in the land of cheese, some people think Anthony may have turned Japanese, but a simple look at his rounded belly reminds you that he is still a Frog!



WEDDINGS

IN

JAPAN:

AN

OVERVIEW

Have you ever been to a wedding in Japan? If you have, then you know that they're quite different to the ones you may be used to at home. Since the 'Wedding Season' is upon us, let me give you a quick primer to the kinds of ceremonies you might be invited to attend. You can also read more about Japanese weddings this month in the Fashion section (pages 28 & 30) and Food section editorial (page 36).

Traditional Japanese weddings are, most often, held at Shinto Shrines. The bride and groom both wear formal kimonos and observe the proper Shinto rituals. These rituals and customs often include the wearing of ceremonial headgear: the *wataboshi*, or the *tsunokakushi*. The *tsunokakushi* is an interesting headpiece; it is a piece of white cloth, usually silk, which is wrapped around the bride's head. This cloth serves to hide the bride's 'horns of jealousy, selfishness and ego'. It also symbolizes the bride's acceptance of becoming a loving, obedient and gentle wife. Some brides are also painted white from head to toe, in an effort to symbolize her 'pure' status.

The traditional ceremonies are often very small. Only family and very close friends attend, with the rest of the couple's friends attending the *kekkon hiroen*, or after-wedding party (what we'd usually call a reception). This is usually where an ALT, invited to a traditional wedding,

will find themselves. If however, you are invited to the ceremony, remember to dress sedately, and be very quiet; think: 'fly on the wall'.

With the growing influence of western culture in Japan, and the perceived glamour of a 'white wedding' it was inevitable that some Japanese people would want to imitate or borrow aspects from the west. These 'white weddings' are often held in special locations, modeled after Christian wedding chapels or churches. These two types of wedding, Shinto and western, combined into what we now call the contemporary Japanese wedding.

A large part of the wedding service is the morning photographs. The couple attends the town office in the morning and signs the wedding register, becoming officially married under the eyes of the law. After this, the couple, and their families, spends time with a photographer. The photographs, which are usually very professional and taken at beautiful locations, include the couple, their parents and other relatives. The photos symbolize the joining of two families and as such, a lot of thought goes into the staging of these elaborate snaps.

After finishing with the photographer, the couple, along with chosen guests, travels to the Shinto shrine. There, a priest conducts the ceremony joining the couple. This ceremony may be less formal than the fully traditional weddings. One of the key moments in the ceremony is the exchange of special cups of marital sake. Some modern couples also exchange rings and vows now. Other couples will travel to a special western style chapel to exchange the rings and vows in front of the rest of their guests.

There is a growing industry for these white weddings, often called 'happy weddings'. Some hotels have their own private wedding chapel, often next door to the main reception hall. In the case of larger wedding parties, some hotels even broadcast the wedding to television screens in the reception hall, so that all the guests can see.

This can, occasionally, cause friction with Christians. The 'ministers' are often not Christian, and Christian iconography is used in the wedding. This has been called cultural appropriation, and misusing somebody's closely held beliefs as a fashion statement.

Like Western-style weddings, a reception takes place right after the wedding ceremony. There may also be a few western style traditions that you will recognize such as the cake cutting and the newlyweds' first dance. There are also some traditional foods that couples eat, to symbolize their union, which you can read more about in the Food section in this issue.

The bride and groom may go through some elaborate costume changes. It is becoming the norm for couples to have up to five separate outfits, one each for the town office, the photographer, the Shinto ceremony, the chapel ceremony and the reception party. As a lot of thought goes into these outfits, make sure to compliment the couple on their attire and take a few photos every time they change their clothes. For more information about wedding fashion, check out the article later in this issue, "Wedding Fashion 101."

Of course, it wouldn't be a Japanese event without copious amounts of speeches. But thankfully, custom dictates that they be short. Later, after all the speeches are finished the couple performs the 'candle service'. The bride and groom go from table to table, lighting special candles on the guests' tables, upon finishing that, they join their candles and light the candle on their own table, called the 'Memorial Candle'. This usually signifies the end of the reception, there may be a final speech wishing all the guests a good evening, and mentioning where the *nijikai* (afterparty) will be held

Now, when an ALT is asked to be part of a wedding, there are several things that you will want to be aware of, aside from the symbolism of the ceremony. You must RSVP to the wedding using the response card that you are given, and be sure to know if you will be bringing a guest before responding. If you are unable to attend, you are still expected to respond, it is considered poor form not to include a cash present.

If you attend, you are also expected to bring a sizeable cash present, to ease the costs of hosting the event. If there is no amount listed on the invite, ask a fellow guest, a rough estimate for a good friend would be anywhere above 30,000 yen. You should also provide this in a special, pristine envelope, called a *shugi-bukuro*, with your name written on the front of it. It is considered polite to go to a bank, and get brand new, uncreased bills to give. When arriving at the reception, there will be a dedicated person, usually by the doors, who will take the letter from you. Make sure to sign the guest-book too, before moving into the reception hall.

Also, try to remember that the day is not about you! There may be a lot of guests there that are interested in talking to an ALT, or procuring your services for their children. Just keep on turning the attention back to the bride, and how wonderful she is. After all, you don't want her to take off the *tsunokakushi* and show you if she really does have horns!

If you have attended a Japanese style wedding, and witnessed the pageantry as it unfolds, please let me know, or send in a few photos of the happy couple to the magazine.

FURTHER READING

<http://www.allinjapan.org/traditional-japanese-wedding/>

<http://gojapan.about.com/cs/traditionculture/a/japanesewedding.htm>

http://www.yamasa.org/acjs/network/english/newsletter/things_japanese_27.html



ENTERTAINMENT

REVIEW Michael Arias's *Tekkon Kinkreet* (2006)

An adaptation of unconventional manga artist Taiyo Matsumoto's 1993 cult trilogy of the same name, *Tekkonkinkreet* follows the tribulations of *Kuro* ('black') and *Shiro* ('white'). These two street orphans fight to keep the fictional Japanese city of Treasure Town from falling into the clutches of dangerous *yakuza* and a corrupt businessman by the name of Snake.

While both *Kuro* and *Shiro* possess the requisite anime supernatural martial arts abilities, they are as different as—predictably—black and white. The two present a myriad of dichotomies: experience and innocence, hate and love, violence and peace, tradition and modernity, and nihilism and the fear of God. Though none of these themes are explored in great depth, they serve as powerful forces balancing the relationship between the two young boys—all while tearing Treasure Town apart.

These contrasts are also toyed with in delightful little ironies. One of my favorite moments being when the old *yakuza* with a heart of gold, Rat, expresses his disillusionment with his work as Snake—who, it deserves mentioning, looks like a cross between Voldemort and Lyle Langley from the Monorail episode on *The Simpsons*—moves forward with his plan to bulldoze Treasure Town's historic strip club in favor of an immense children's amusement park. These clever moments make an otherwise straightforward plot a pleasure to watch unravel.

The story is good fun, but *Tekkonkinkreet's* real strength lies in its unorthodox animation style. While there has certainly been progress in the raw visual quality of anime over the years, the genre long remained latched onto a style just as narrow and tired as that of Dreamworks CGI. Fostering some much-needed variety, this has been changing lately with certain series—notably *Aku no Hana's* extensive use of rotoscoping in 2013—

integrating more unconventional animation techniques, both new and old. Back in 2006, *Tekkonkinkreet* was a forerunner in this development.

While the contribution of Matsumoto's unusual character design cannot be discounted, a lot of what makes the film so novel comes from Michael Arias' directing. The first westerner to direct a Japanese animated film¹, he took full advantage of his chance to reinvigorate the genre. Using CGI technology, Arias was able to 'unlock' the camera and simulate "hand-held, dolly, aerial, time-lapse, and underwater shots"¹ that were traditionally impossible or prohibitively expensive to animate. Far from being just gimmicks, these effects do a startlingly good job of bringing Matsumoto's colorful Treasure Town to life, and help give *Tekkonkinkreet* mainstream appeal outside of anime's traditional target audiences.

A visceral and visually stunning lover's quarrel between light and dark, *Tekkonkinkreet* reminds us that the *Kuros* and *Shiros* of this world are never as separate as we are tempted to think.

Have you read, watched, played or created anything interesting lately? Be sure to let me know at connect.entertainment@ajet.net.

¹ Interview by Ben Ettinger. "Michael Arias interview." Anipages. . 17 04 2007. Web. 12 Mar 2014. http://www.pelleas.net/aniTOP/index.php/title_44.

THIS MONTH IN ENTERTAINMENT...

Now that it's finally warm out again, it's the perfect time to strap on those moldy trainers and get back into shape. But, if like many, you find the prospect of running long distances terrifyingly dry, look no further than this month's Entertainment section to see how you can sauce things up. Tokyo-ite Rachel Roberts gives us an exclusive look into the world of "hashing"—running clubs that boast motivational innovations like beer stations, casual nudity, and toilet humor that would make Louis C.K. blush.

If you're after things more artsy and less fartsy, check out Tochigi JET Christian Keck's feature on Kyoto's ethereal folk songstress Ichiko Aoba or this month's Spotlight on Patrick Alexander, an Australian comic book artist currently living in Tochigi. For the cinephiles, I've reviewed Michael Arias's 2006 anime feature, *Tekkonkinkreet*. Happy reading!



SPOTLIGHT



Patrick Alexander, Classroom Cartoonist

I'm an ALT at a high school in Tochigi prefecture, finishing the winter term of my first year. I've also been a semi-professional cartoonist for thirteen years—and thank goodness for that.

One of the JET Programme's 'late upgrades', I arrived in my city only four days before classes started. On top of the immediate rigmarole familiar to you, I was also expected to plan and conduct my own lessons from day one.

My quick and desperate peek at the legendary lesson plan stack, built by my predecessors in times of old, only flustered me: mystery documents that were unlabelled, disordered, and lacking explanations or instructions. I realised that, counter-intuitively, the quickest thing would be to unzip my pencil case and make my own teaching materials from scratch, which is what I hastily did and have been doing ever since.

I populate my worksheets with cute, goofy-looking characters; decidedly uncool, but fun to look at. Dynamic blackboard illustrations are sometimes compliment my in-class teaching, and if done well, can produce that "Ohhh!" expression ALTs hope so badly to see on their students' faces. I aim only to be clear and engaging, as teachers and cartoonists ought to be.

Settling into the job, month by month, I've gradually had more worktime to spend making materials and have come to enjoy it. It's a satisfying challenge to resolve the in-class application of a lesson plan, as well as the design and illustration elements of an activity idea.

Plus the ability to do something practical with my art is a rewarding novelty.

Little by little I've been sharing my materials online. Have a look: <http://gumroad.com/patricksensei>

Patrick Alexander
panic@chickennation.com
090-6542-0572





Rachel Roberts, Tokyo

TOKYO'S HASH HOUSE HARRIERS



The July 4th hash in Nakameguro in 2013

Just some examples of Tokyo hash names on bag tags



I arrive late. Typical. I figured when I got to the station I'd see someone who would notice my obvious "new girl in town who doesn't know where the hell she is or how to speak the local language" look and call me over. I'm wearing my "On-On" knee-high socks, surely they'd recognize that. But I'm late and the pack has already left.

I look around the station, realizing I'm not sure I've come to the right exit. Beginning to lose hope and about to head back inside the station, I notice a white mark in the shape of the arrow just up the hill ahead of me. I instantly recognize it as a hash mark—made with flour—and start running in the direction the arrow points. Soon I find another, and another, and for about half a mile I run following marks left by strangers, with no clue where I am, or where I will end up. Eventually I come upon a Japanese man and woman who look like they are runners and ask them "Are you?" to which they responded "Onnn-On...err, looking!"

I follow them and the sound of whistles, through crowded brightly lit streets, down dark shoulder-width alleyways, up hills in residential pockets and over bridges, for miles, until we finally reach the familiar words "BEER NEAR" written in chalk signalling the end of the trail is near. We reach the meeting point and are rewarded with the promised beer. I hear a shriek and turn to see my old college friend who I soon learn is now "Depends on the Horse". We then spend the next few hours at a restaurant where we eat more than enough to counter the calories we burned running, and drink seemingly unlimited beer and sake, and I am transported back to the past summer in Portland where I joined this crazy group.

Have I lost you?

Just about everything in our highly social, technologically connected society has become game-fied by entrepreneurs and app developers looking to make a profit off turning your mundane routines into opportunities to earn virtual points. The internet has zapped our attention-spans and we insist on being entertained whenever possible. My purpose in stating this is not to criticize, but observe and introduce you to a long-standing yet rather unknown form of social interaction and urban exploration—exercise and exploration (please credit me for all future uses of this term).

One of the biggest obstacles I have had, and I find that my non-running-loving friends have with running is it's boring, and there's no goal. It's difficult enough to find time and the motivation to exercise, but if it's monotonous and dull, you'll never stick with it. Hashing is anything but.

The Hash House Harriers are an international "drinking club with a running problem" that began about 75 years ago in Malaysia with a group of British civil servants and businessmen. Today the group consists of almost 2,000 chapters all around the world, including Antarctica. The origins of hashing are quite interesting to read about, but I'll let you Google that for yourself. Before each hash, a "hare" lays arrows on the ground typically with chalk, or flour. Hares are given either with a 5-20 minute head start, depending on how speedy they are, or if they're newer to hare-ing, they may lay their trail ahead of time. Hashers then

follow these arrows until they reach a circle marked with an X through it. This is a checkpoint, and all bets are off as to which way the trail goes from here. Everyone then runs in every possible direction looking for the next mark, and when it is found the hasher who discovers it yells "ON-ON!" and the game continues. Through narrow alleyways, "shiggy" filled forests, across busy intersections and down crowded sidewalks, hashers run with abandon and call out to each other upon finding the next arrow. Next, suppose you reach a mark that says CB, or in some hashes YBF. This is a "Check Back" or "You've Been F**ked" mark for a false trail, and you must go back to last arrow to find where the trail continues. As I mentioned above, when you reach the end of the trail, you will see the words "BEER NEAR!" and soon arrive to a gathering of hashers who welcome you, yelling "On-in!" and hand you a beer.

But there are rules to guide this debaucherous chaos ("Doesn't sound too debaucherous to me..." you say? Just wait). Breaking the rules results in drinking beer as a punishment, while honorable deeds are rewarded with...beer. You must not wear that cute shirt you got for free the one time you decided to do a 5k Turkey Trot, Zombie Run, half-marathon, or another race of some form. If you do, you are a "race-ist" and you get a down-down. This means: chug the Dixie cup of beer—or larger depending on who's pouring—you're given. "Whatever doesn't go in you must go on you." That is, you must pour the remains of what you don't drink on your head. Are you wearing new shoes to a hash? Down-down for you, and you're drinking it out of those shoes.

As a newcomer to the hash, you are a virgin and are referred to by the name "Just (your name)." After a specified number of hashes, or once you do something stupid or memorable enough, you earn a name, but they're generally vulgar and the hope is that you'll hate it, so don't complain, or you'll be given an even more offensive name. Addressing someone by their real name rather than their hash name will earn you a down-down as well. Finally, in some hashes, if you break the rules, your punishment is sitting on a block of ice with your pants down, but don't worry, that's a bit too crazy for Japan.

My first experience with hashing involved 1) a running-of-the-bulls-esque game where hashers in white shirts were chased by bulls (the hares) wielding colorful dye markers, 2) a passerby on his bike who upon learning we were "running for beer" abandoned his bike ride and ran the rest of the trail with us while holding his bike, and 3) being serenaded by 20 or so hashers with an adapted version of the French song Alouette, with traditional verses replaced with hashing related ones, and prompts to flash my boobs. Yours may be different, but is it any wonder I stayed?

For more info on hashing and how to join a group near you, check the website <http://www.tokyohash.org/> if you're in Japan. If you're traveling and want to join a hash for the day, just Google Hash House Harriers and the name of the city you're in and chances aren't bad that you'll find one. You can also email me if you have less logistical questions, at chelbylu@gmail.com. Hashers range from all ages, and running abilities; some prefer to walk, and some prefer not to drink, so everyone is welcome!

Rachel Roberts, known as Semper Paratus ("Always Ready" in Latin) in the hashing world, has been running for beer for nearly two years, and living in Tokyo for the past year and a half. When not bewildering innocent pedestrians by yelling "ON-ON!" while bursting from an alleyway somewhere in the 23 wards of Tokyo, she is analyzing biological data at Keio University, discussing philosophy in a Meetup group, discovering a new alternative bar in a basement with couchsurfers she hosts, or trying to teach herself Bob Marley songs on guitar.



Called out for a 'down-down' at the hanami sake hash

A hash mismanagement couple and one of Tokyo's longer attending hashers as evidenced by his shirt



The most anticipated hash mark of all

TONGUE-DEAF #1: A FOREIGN EAR ON JAPANESE MUSIC



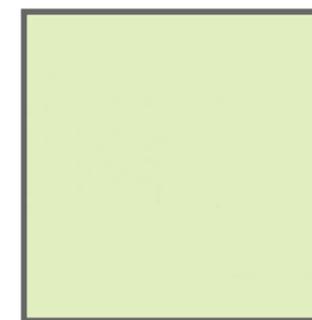
Christian William, Tochigi

Your ears are an adept and finely tuned instrument. From the pretentious audiophile pursuing virgin vinyl to the tone-deaf chump juggling a microphone and several nama biru in the karaoke parlor—as listeners, our brains preemptively analyze notes, sounds, and melody. The brain and ear work together—allowing us to know when a song finishes, arrives at a V chord, or when we have been sonically deceived—when a song fakes you out and keeps going. Sure, you may not know a lick of music theory, and maybe you can't hold a tune on a plastic kazoo, but you intuitively predict where the song is sonically going.

As a listener, my aurality dramatically shifts when listening to "foreign" music. The disconnection from the lyrics due to my inability to speak Japanese creates an amalgamation in my head—where I scrutinize and listen to every possible granule of sound in every second, and simultaneously, remove myself from content because I don't bloody know what they are singing about. Lyrics are essential to most modern songs, yet I still enjoy some Japanese music immensely, despite not understanding it. In this series, I want to further explore and share some words on Japanese artists I have found while living in Japan: an attempt to explain the confusing fulfillment I get from songs I will never fully know but which still emotionally stir me.

Our inaugural artist is Ichiko Aoba, a 24-year old classically trained guitarist and vocalist from Chiba, based in Kyoto. To date, she has released four full-length LPs. I stumbled upon her 2012 LP, *Utabiko*, while combing through Tokyo venue websites looking for gigs to play.

Ichiko-san's lovely third LP, *Utabiko*, is a bare, minimal arrangement of guitar and vocals over eight tracks—beguiled vulnerability emanates from both the languages of words and notes. Masterful picking and strumming on nylon strings complement and invigorate her disciplined and airy vocals. The plethora of guitar techniques, chords and melodies makes for a great no-nihongode listen. Ichiko-san runs through about every possible guitar trick, pattern, and skill in the book, evoking



The very minimalist cover to *Utabiko*

sweetness, gloom, melancholy, and conflict. The guitar could easily sit alone without her voice; it is so rich in character and persuasion. Seven minutes of uninterrupted guitar and vocals is risky, especially as an opening track, but "IMPERIAL SMOKE TOWN" works because the guitar is so emotive. Subconsciously I trust in the guitar—an extension of her—to harbor and translate the feelings in Ichiko-san's words.

Ichiko's voice delivers wispy, sturdy sounds over the guitar. With mild-to-heavy reverb, it acts as a guide or anchor on the tracks—never as colorful or complicated as the guitar. The stand out and the album's closer, "Hikari no Furusato", begins solemnly with an acapella on a line that barely hangs in the air. Her hand brushes harshly against the guitar as she begins brilliant picking patterns. My ear even takes notice of swallowing and breaths in-between singing. All these natural sound occurrences feed the stark and revealing atmosphere built throughout the 36-minute album. I could but sparingly regurgitate some her Japanese sentences without content, but I feel as if I know so much about this young lady because of *Utabiko*.

Christian is a second-year ALT in Sano, Tochigi. An active musician in Japan, he enjoys recording music at home in over-sized sweaters and Skippy peanut butter. You can keep up with his projects and words at: www.christianwilliam.bandcamp.com or @ifcwilliam or read a bit more about him in the September 2013 issue of Connect.



FASHION & BEAUTY

EDITORIAL What to Wear for Weddings

How are the glorious sunshiney days been treating you, dear reader? I've been munching on sandwiches and strawberries under a canopy of gorgeous sakura, organising my warmer weather wardrobe and cycling home happily after dark without shivering.

Spring and autumn are popular times for lovers to say "I do", so you might suddenly find yourself receiving an embossed invitation. The first two questions most ask are, "What should I wear?" and "What presents should I bring?" Read on for some of my suggestions, and be sure to peruse our Culture and Food sections for more wedding-related specials!

The ceremony you will attend will either be western-style or traditional. The former would see the bride in a fancy white gown first at a fancy mock cathedral, followed by a change of dress at a fancy western-style restaurant. If the wedding is going to be a traditional one, it will likely take place at a shrine and then at a traditional Japanese restaurant, with the bride in a unique kimono.

Either way, a Japanese wedding is a formal event (unless the invitation card promises sand, sea, the setting sun and pina colodas), so stay far away from linen shirts, jeans or anything too sexy (namely bare shoulders or deep cleavage).

Ladies would do well to rock up in party frocks (knee-length cocktail dresses in the daytime and longer, more formal ballgown-esque frocks for evening parties. You pretty much have access to any colour apart from white or ivory, because that's the bride's colour. Female guests generally wear thick make-up (immaculate foundation, lashings of mascara and carefully-applied lipstick.)

Most will also sport elaborate updos and carry dainty handbags or elegant shawls.

Wearing a kimono would look right at home at a traditional wedding, and you can compare notes with the other lovely ladies. There is a tendency for younger girls to prefer bright hues for their dresses or kimono while married women opt for muted tones.

Male guests will be in impossibly shiny shoes and spiffy black suits, with their hair gelled, spiked or backcombed. In Japan, gentlemen can do no wrong in a smart suit, and although traditionally men wore sombre full suits with a white tie, coloured suits and ties are gaining popularity.

Ultimately though, the dress code depends on the bride and groom, so when in doubt, ask!

The reception after the ceremony will consist of many delicate dishes, plenty of banter and of course, drinking. There will be speeches and sometimes a performance. Friends report seeing a string quartet, taiko drumming and mochi-pounding.

Pick up a fancy envelope at your local bookstore and place your cash gift for the happy couple in it. The going rate for friends is 30,000 yen per person or 50,000 yen per couple. To thank you for sharing their joy, you will find beautifully-wrapped packages by your seat. They are likely to contain towels, home accessories or foodstuff.

Remember to smile a lot at the blissful couple and for the photographer, and to enjoy the novel experience!

THIS MONTH IN FASHION AND BEAUTY...

With wedding season coming up (three Japanese friends of mine are getting married!), the Fashion and Beauty section has decided to bring you a wedding and kimono special!

Our Spotlightee of the Month Chloe Wooding shares her love of and appreciation for making a fashion statement the traditional way.

Aimee Wenyue Chen speaks with Sara Kissick-Skeel to demystify the art of kimono-wearing. It's true that we won't become overnight experts, but Aimee's informative article serves as a great reference to the basics of kimono.

Rachael Ragalye provides a well-researched and interesting guide to understanding the numerous—some say mind-boggling—options a Japanese couple has when it comes to selecting the perfect attire to get married in. Who knew?

And in case you do get invited to a wedding celebration and aren't quite sure how to proceed, check out the editorial where I share what I've learnt from talking to people face-to-face and online.



Let us know what you think, and see you in May!
connect.fashion@ajet.net

SPOTLIGHT

Chloe Wooding, Master of Kimono and All Things Japan

With our focus on kimono, who better to talk with than former Fukushima JET Chloe Wooding, who—in addition to enjoying hiking and horses—has studied tea ceremony for 16 years, plays the koto and can be found carrying mikoshi at festivals!

Give us the backstory!

Tea ceremony involves wearing kimono, so I initially attempted to learn the art from books. I then found out that students at one of my high schools made kimono as part of the curriculum before receiving instruction on how to wear it.

The instructor asked if I would be interested in taking part in a kimono competition. She was a good coach, and co-workers kept me company as I practised after school. I ended up winning the World Finals in the foreign division!

Why the fascination?

Kimono is a cultural treasure. I love the beautiful colors and patterns that reflect the seasons and one's personality. People used to wearing kimono always look graceful and elegant. Once you master the basics, you will find it to be a versatile and comfortable garment. It's lovely when someone tells me seeing me in a kimono makes them want to wear one too.

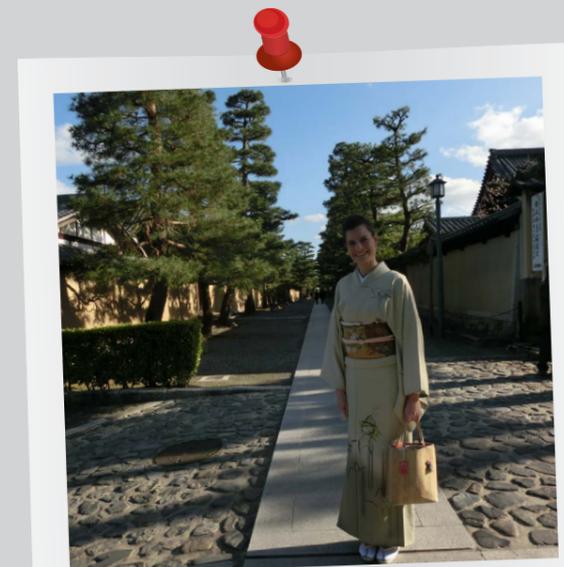
I'm just starting out. Help!

1. Look through the town pages or ask your acquaintances to recommend a teacher. Go with someone you feel comfortable

with, because (for traditional studies) you can't switch teachers once you begin lessons.

2. Be patient. Practise diligently! It'll take time to learn which obi goes with which kimono, and about levels of formality.

3. There are many secondhand options available. Go shopping with someone who has experience. Look after your kimono.



JAPANESE WEDDING FASHION 101

Rachael Ragalye, Gunma

A wedding in Japan ranges from a simple affair with one dress, to a full-blown theatrical production—with staff from the bridal salon waiting in the wings to re-outfit and restyle the bride several times throughout the day. Generally, what the bride and groom wear for their ceremony is determined by the choice of venue. A white wedding dress is worn for Western style ceremonies. These so-called “white weddings” are held in hotels, restaurants, resorts or “cathedrals”, which are usually venues constructed for their ambiance rather than for religious purposes.

Japanese dress or *wafuku* is for wedding ceremonies held at Shinto shrines. It is also possible to have a wedding at a Buddhist temple in a ceremony known as *butsuzen kekkon shiki*, literally “wedding ceremony before the Buddhist altar.” The idea behind this style is to inform one’s ancestors of the wedding, as well as to ask for their blessing and protection. As Buddhist temples are generally associated with funeral rites, this style is not commonly used. However, individual preferences vary, and I interviewed a Japanese woman named Yuri who got married last December. She chose a *butsuzen* ceremony because her beloved grandfather had passed away three years ago, and she wanted him to be a part of the ceremony.

The bride and groom will typically change outfits for the reception. At a white wedding, the bride may change into a colored gown, while the groom may opt for a different tuxedo. If the couple were married in *wafuku*, they sometimes choose to wear Western dress for their reception

What makes the many costume changes possible is the fact that more than fifty percent of brides in Japan rent—rather than buy—their wedding day attire, at least according to popular bridal magazine *Zexy*. The types of outfits, services and charges vary considerably. For example, Yuri went to a rental salon that specialized in *kimono* that were over a hundred years old. There, she chose a black *hikifurisode* with the help of her grandmother.

AN OVERVIEW OF JAPANESE WEDDING ATTIRE

Wedding Dress ウエディングドレス

Wedding dresses in Japan come in a variety of styles such as A-line, princess, sheath and mermaid. In its Spring 2014 edition, *Zexy* included a spread of 1920s-inspired dresses worn by Caucasian models with period-style feathered or gem-studded headbands over sleek bobs. The styling was undoubtedly inspired by the success of Baz Luhrmann’s adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*. However, these designer dresses by PRONOVIAS are for purchase only, and similar designs do not seem to be available on a rental basis. Salons stock princess cuts or A-lines with full skirts, the perennial favorites of Japanese brides.

Color Dress カラードレス

Unlike brides in the United States who change out of their wedding gown in favor of a dress that will allow them to dance freely at their reception, a Japanese bride’s color dress for the reception may be just as—or even more elaborate—than the gown worn for the ceremony.

These dresses are usually princess cut with full skirts. Other

A wedding ceremony at Meiji Shrine in Tokyo. The bride is in a *shiomuku* with a *wataboushi* headdress. Her groom has on a *montsuki hakama* while her mother is wearing a *kurotomesode*.



features include gem-studded bodices, silk flowers, and yards of tulle gathered into fountains of ruffles and rosettes. While some of these gowns may remind one of prom dresses on steroids, others are stunning creations that seem to have come straight out of classic Disney animations. For those who are wondering how the bride will be able to shimmy when encased in a sea of flounces and frills, chances are she probably has no plans to do so. Dancing at Japanese weddings is uncommon, and receptions generally consist of a sit-down meal, speeches, and performances by hired entertainers. I performed at two weddings with my *taiko* group, and there was no dancing to be seen at either.

Tuxedo タキシード

While personal preference must be taken into account, the groom will typically wear a white tuxedo for the ceremony. He may then change into a grey or silver suit to offset the bride’s showy reception attire.

Shiomuku 白無垢

The *shiomuku* is the “full dress” option for wedding *kimono*. As the name suggests, the outfit is completely white (*shiro*) with no color patterns (*muku*, literally, no dirt). The fabric itself, however, is often made from brocade, on which auspicious symbols such as cranes have been stitched in shimmering white. This costume requires a highly formal *kimono* called the *uchikake*. The *uchikake* is a garment that was worn as formal dress by women of the *samurai* class during the Edo period. Today it is worn only by brides, or by geisha during performances. As the last layer of the ensemble, it is worn over the *kimono* and *obi*. Therefore, it is not belted with an additional sash. The hem of the *uchikake* is heavily padded, causing it to trail along the floor like the train of

a wedding gown. A headdress called the *wataboushi* (綿帽子) can only be worn as part of this ensemble.

Iro-uchikake 色打ち掛け

The *iro-uchikake* (literally color *uchikake*) is the second most formal option in women’s wedding attire, and may be worn for either the ceremony or the reception. A style of headdress called a *tsunokakushi* (literally horn-hider) is often worn as part of this ensemble. This headdress requires that the bride’s hair be set in a style reminiscent of a geisha; consequently, most modern brides use a pre-styled wig.

Hikifurisode 引き振り袖

Like the *furisode* worn by young, unmarried women on occasions such as *seijinshiki* (Coming of Age Day), this garment also has vibrant patterns and long, swinging sleeves. What sets this *furisode* apart is its weighted, trailing hem. Traditional Japanese wedding headgear (*tsunokakushi*) may also be worn as a part of this ensemble. The most formal of *hikifurisode* is the *kuro-hikifurisode*, a beautifully patterned *kimono* with a black base.

Interestingly, *kimono* are typically cut to a standard length and worn gathered over a hidden cloth tie called a *koshihimo*. This allows the length to be adjusted to suit the height of the wearer, enabling almost anyone to wear the same garment regardless of the individual’s height. However, older *kimono* were cut for people who were shorter than modern day Japanese.

In Yuri’s case, although the *kimono* she chose was a *kuro-hikifurisode*, she was too tall for the weighted hem to trail. It was a bit of a disappointment, but she was so smitten with the

design that she chose to wear the kimono as a regular furisode.

Montsuki Hakama 紋付袴

Montsuki literally means "with crests." This is formal wafuku for men. It consists of a jacket-like garment called a *haori* that bears the crests, a kimono, a pant-like garment called a *hakama*, and accessories. The kimono and haori are generally black, while the hakama is black and white pinstriped. However, other colors such as white, purple, and blue for the kimono and haori are available. Likewise hakama may have a different pattern or color gradient.

Supporting cast of characters: family and guests' outfits

Mothers of the bride and groom usually wear a formal type of kimono called the *kurotomesode*, beautiful black kimonos with vibrant patterns splashed at the hem. Fathers will usually wear some style of Western dress, though wafuku would not be out of place for a Shinto ceremony. Guests may wear whatever they like: party dresses or kimono for women, suits or kimono for men. Bridesmaids are not a common part of Japanese wedding ceremonies.

With a myriad of options available, even brides themselves are confused about what is appropriate. Seen on a Yahoo! Japan message board:

"I'm thinking of wearing a kuro-hikifurisode and a Western hairstyle for my ceremony at the shrine, and then a dress for the reception. (...) I'm concerned that my outfit for the ceremony is going to look the same as my relatives' kurotomesode, and I'm wondering if a shiromuku isn't a safer choice."

The bride-to-be's dilemma was answered by someone that had married in the January of that year. Her advice to the bride was not to worry about blending in.

"Although the mother of the bride and groom wear kurotomesode, the bride's kuro-hikifurisode is decorated with lots of accessories and the obi is thicker, so there's no way you'll blend in."

The lady who provided the advice had herself worn a kuro-hikifurisode with a *tsunokakushi* for her ceremony. She received her guests in the same attire sans headgear, opting instead for a western hairstyle. She wore a wedding gown for the reception. Prior to the ceremony, she had a photo shoot done in a *shiromuku*. That's a total of three costumes and two hairstyles for one wedding!



The bride wears a kuro-hikifurisode that is more than a hundred years old. Her husband beams in his montsuki hakama.

Western versus Wafuku

So what makes someone choose western attire over wafuku or vice versa? The language used in the advertising for the two very different styles may provide a clue. In the first few pages of the magazine, Zexy presents a spread about the kinds of images created by certain fabric and cut combinations. For example, silk taffeta combined with a "big line" makes for a "classical princess." Lace is "romantic," but when combined with a "slender line", it makes for "country girl" bride.

The language used for the wafuku section differs considerably. Next to the picture of a model wearing an *iro-uchikake* is a caption stating that a Japanese-style ceremony is "suitable" for "adult" brides (*otona hanayoume ni fusawashii jibinn washiki sutairu*). Interested in exploring this difference further, I asked Yuri what she thought of "white weddings." Echoing the sentiment presented in the magazine, she felt that wearing a white dress projected childishness, as white conveys newness and purity. To her, a wedding ceremony is an important life event, and the wafuku is something befitting the occasion. She also feels that Japanese-style weddings are becoming more popular as the average marrying age of women rises; she herself got married at thirty-one.

Of course, many couples combine elements of both Western and Japanese attire into their weddings, perhaps thus getting the best of both worlds. Maybe someone should talk to TLC about making a reality TV show about the goings-on in a Japanese bridal salon....



A couple just after their 'white wedding' ceremony.

Rachael Ragalye is a 2nd-year ALT in Gunma whose proudest achievement this semester is teaching her high school students the Anna Kendrick song "Cups", along with the "cup game." (They got so good at it! So proud!) Her goal for the spring semester is to have the entire school play together. She spends her free time wondering why the other teachers haven't yet complained about the loud music and strange percussive sounds coming from her classroom...

Additional photos by Eriko Takano, Yuri Ishihara, and Sara Kissick-Skeel

GOTTA CATCH 'EM ALL: THE SEARCH FOR AFFORDABLE KIMONO

Aimee Wenyue Chen, Yamanashi



The writer in a one-pattern komon with nagoya obi (casual)



Licensed kimono stylist Sara Kissick-Skeel in a furisode

While owning a kimono sounds like an expensive affair, it is not too difficult to find high-quality secondhand kimono for a very reasonable price. I bought my kimono for only 2,500 yen, and the *obi* (kimono sash) for 3,500 yen—their combined price being cheaper than many new yukata.

However, wearing a yukata only requires a yukata, an obi, and some ties, while wearing a kimono requires significantly more knowledge and effort. When I first announced excitedly that I would wear my own kimono to a friend's wedding, I had no idea that I would need roughly 30 pieces of clothing, accessories, belts and ties in all.

That said, don't let this change your mind about owning a kimono! Dressing in kimono is a unique and wonderful experience, and I hope to share what to look out for when looking to own (or partially own) a kimono set—without having to break the bank. I'm including advice from Sara Kissick-Skeel, a Tochigi JET who became a licensed kimono stylist in February 2014, and who graciously guided me along when I purchased my first kimono.

Buying...

I'd definitely recommend visiting kimono recycle stores, since it is possible to get quality kimono-related items for a song there. Such stores should be located in all large cities. For example, I found three right next to Yokohama Station.

Sara's tips when shopping at kimono recycle stores:

- If the item is wrapped up, always ask at the counter if you can look inside the package.
- For kimono, ask whether the shop staff found any damage, and if they consider the garment still wearable.
- Always ask to see the entire obi. Inspect it carefully, or ask them to tie it on for you if possible. The location of stains—if any—are a big factor when it comes to wearability.
- If buying online, check photos carefully for flaws, wrinkles, or stains.
- If buying an obi and kimono separately, take the other item (or a picture of it) along to ensure the colors and level of formality match.

Design...

The most important parts of a kimono in terms of design would be the kimono and obi. Because there is much meaning attached to the style, color, and design of a kimono and its obi, it is important to at least make sure they match the formality of the situation, the wearer's age and marital status. A quick search on Google will provide a crash course in basic kimono patterns. When deciding which kimono to wear, people usually keep the season in mind, so pale green or cheery blossoms for spring and colored leaves in the fall. Sara recommends buying according to the "Japanese standard". Very generally speaking, younger women wear brighter colors with flashier designs, while older women wear more subdued colors and designs.

Styling...

A professional kimono stylist can be quite expensive, with charges ranging from 6,000 to 12,000 yen. I did, however, find a place in Shinjuku called Hana Goyomi that did styling for only 3,000 yen! They also have a branch in New York City. Some of you might be fortunate enough—as I was—to know someone

who knows about kimono styling and can help out. Ask your teachers! Ask your friends!

Taking it further...

Attending kimono dressing classes provides opportunities to wear your kimono often and understand how to style them. The style that Sara is licensed for is the Yamano Style Kitsuke, and books for the beginner and intermediate levels are available in both English and Japanese. According to Sara, the head of the Yamano School is Japanese-American, so kimono through Yamano is easy to study for at the first two levels.

To my surprise and delight, hunting for a bargain kimono has led to me learning so much more about Japanese culture—in particular, about a type of fashion that has cultural and historical roots going back more than a thousand years. Sara tells me that she fell in love with kimono because they allow her to feel like she is "walking art."

I agree. Wearing a kimono is wearing art.

Aimee Wenyue Chen has moved 12 times, lived in 3 countries, and speaks 4 languages. She's looking forward to her next move this August, when she finishes up her 3rd year as a CIR in Yamanashi—that is, unless the zombie apocalypse happens. In that case, she'll be the first to go down, seeing as she can't ride a bicycle, drive a car, swim, shoot a crossbow, or otherwise save herself, really.

Here is a summarized list of the parts you will need when putting your kimono together. The items in bold are those which we recommend you purchase at recycle stores.

1. **Hadajuban** – the cotton slip worn over your undergarments.
2. **Juban** – the silk slip you put on above the cotton slip. Its shape is similar to (but shorter) than a regular kimono. Since they come in a range of colors and patterns, ask an experienced shopkeeper for suggestions.
3. **Eri shin** – a plastic strip inserted into the juban to create the shape of the collar.
4. **Han eri** – the optional false collar you sew onto your juban if it doesn't already have embroidery or designs on the collar. The han eri is often white or off-white with embroidery or designs.
5. **Himo** – cotton ties that hold the juban, kimono, and obi together. You need around 4-6 of these.
6. **Cotton padding** – used to even out the shape around the collarbones.
7. **Face towels** – These help flatten all curves. You'll need two to seven towels, depending on your body shape and the type of kimono you're wearing.
8. **Date jime** – A special type of belt that holds the juban and kimono together. You'll need two of these.
9. **Kasane eri** – the optional second false collar that is attached to the kimono collar with pins. Usually very colorful, think of the kasane eri as an accent color for your kimono.



Kimono supplies



Main kimono outerwear

10. **Kimono** –The types that are most often seen are:

- **Komon**, the most casual type of kimono with small, subtle patterns throughout
- **Iromuji**, a single-color kimono
- **Houmongi**, a versatile, formal kimono with patterns covering the sleeves, shoulders, and base of the kimono
- **Furisode**, kimono in bright colors with long patterned sleeves worn by unmarried young women, usually at coming-of-age ceremonies

11. **Obi** –When buying an obi, it is important to note the width, length, style, and motif of the obi.

- Fukuro obi are very long and wide, which makes them more formal. They can be used to tie a variety of knots.
- Shorter and thinner obi such as the nagoya obi are more casual, and can only be used to tie a common taiko knot.
- Hosoi obi are even thinner—and a little shorter—than nagoya obi, and are an effective and simple choice for someone just getting to know kimono. Depending on the pattern and formality, you can use hosoi obi with yukata or komon.

12. **Obi makura** – an obi "pillow" that is used to add shape to the obi knot.

13. **Obi age** – a scarf that is tied above the obi. Look for accent colors that contrast with and highlight your obi and kimono.

14. **Obi jime** – a decorated cord tied around the obi. The color should be vivid and match the formality of your kimono and obi.

15. **Obi dome** – an optional brooch for the obi jime.

16. **Zori** – formal kimono sandals. Color should match your kimono and obi. To prevent pain or slipping, make the effort to hit several recycle shops for sandals that fit—note that the sandal should be 2cm shorter than your foot.

17. **Tabi** – stiff white socks worn with zori. Stretch options are available.

18. **Kanzashi** – hair pieces. For furisode, hair pieces can be large or small. For houmongi, the hair pieces are smaller and more sophisticated.

19. **Kimono bag** – optional, but should closely match or be paired with the kimono sandals.

20. **Haori** – an optional light jacket worn to add warmth or formality. You could also go for a feather shawl in colder weather.

FOOD

EDITORIAL Wedding Food in Japan

Ahh, spring. Birds chirping, sun shining, and flowers blooming. It's the season of hanami and re-awakening after long and dull winters. It comes as no surprise that spring is a popular wedding season worldwide, and Japan is no exception. To stay in tune with the season, the Culture, Fashion and Food sections are discussing Japanese weddings this month.

As I had never actually attended a Japanese wedding myself, I decided to ask experienced friends and coworkers how they would describe the food. Most of them said it was a lot like what would be served at a bonenkai, or end of year party, but more elaborate. They explained that some couples choose Western dishes and others Japanese style courses, but that often these influences are blended.

Digging a little deeper, I discovered that much like the symbolic dishes of New Year's osechi ryori (which you can read more about in the December 2012 issue), there are certain foods traditionally served at Japanese weddings that represent "happiness, prosperity, longevity and many children".¹ As red is considered a lucky, celebratory color; foods such as lobster and sekihan (sticky rice with adzuki beans) are often served.² It used to be popular to include dishes prepared with konbu (kelp) as the word sounds like yorokobu which means to be "delighted" or "to congratulate".³

Decades ago, these symbolic Japanese foods used to be prepared not by reception hall or hotel staff, but by the couple's close relatives or neighbours.⁴ A combination of cuisine influences such as French, Japanese and Chinese is often found on reception menus, as this increases the chances of all guests enjoying their food, regardless of age or preferences.⁵

Not only is the type of food served important, the amount is also symbolic. Due to superstition around numbers, there are rules

by Ariane

for monetary gifts as well as food quantity. Serving four plates should be avoided as shi means death, and even numbers of dishes being served can be easily divided in half, and anything symbolizing an even split in two is bad luck for obvious reasons!³ We also have to remember that incorporating these traditions may not be as popular today as it once was. One aspect of the ceremony I was surprised to learn about was the fake cake! Usually made of wax and less costly than the real deal, an inedible cake is often used for the symbolic cake cutting ceremony—guests are given genuine gâteau later on!⁴

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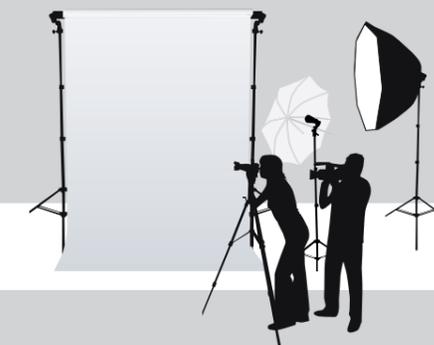
THIS MONTH IN FOOD...

Ready to dig in to another issue of CONNECT: Food Edition? Get your digestive muscles ready, because this month is a bumper crop! First up, we've got the whims and ways of Japanese wedding foods, in the form of an editorial by Ariane! Wondering what you'll be chowing down on when your JTE finally ties the knot with the cute P.E. teacher she's been dating? I've got just three words for you: endless dessert buffet.

For Spotlight this month, we head to Fukushima for a look at Erika Ehren's amazing efforts towards raising money for the Philippines—with food! Our features this issue are at opposite ends of the meal spectrum: delicious moreish cookie bars, and make-your-own pickles! Looking for a sweet treat, a sour snack, or—*gasp!*—both? Check out their recipes! You'll be pickling up a cookie storm in no time flat, with this month's Connect Food section!



SPOTLIGHT



Erika Ehren, Cooking for a Cause

Erika Ehren, a 3rd-year Fukushima JET from Wisconsin, America, is no cooking newbie. She grew up in the kitchen, sandwiched between two heritage cooking styles: Philippine cooking flair from mom, and down-home Americana from dad. More often than not, you'll see a grilled steak and a *pancit* (Philippine fried noodles) sharing the same plate in her kitchen! Since moving to Japan, she's adapted her cooking style, learning from local community cooking classes, but never forgot her roots. When Typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines in November 2013, Erika's family in the north was safe, but knowing so many more weren't so lucky, she knew she had to help however she could. Together with fellow Filipino Russell, another Fukushima JET, they organized a Filipino food buffet and skills auction to raise awareness and donations. It succeeded beyond their wildest dreams: by the end of the night, their tasty cooking had raised more than 300,00 yen!

When she's not running incredibly successful donation drives, Erika likes to stun in other ways: she became a volunteer English tour guide for famous attractions such as Tsuruga Castle in her local city of Aizu-Wakamatsu, featured heavily in the latest NHK *taiga* drama, *Yae no Sakura*. She's also the Block 2 representative for the AJET Special Interest Group, Asian Pacific Islander AJET, and—oh yeah!—the President of the local Fukushima chapter of AJET! From America and the Philippines, to Japan and the world, here comes Erika!



This photo was taken by Albert David of API AJET, which ran a full story on this event on their site. You can read it [here](#).

TOO MUCH LOVE COOKIE BARS

Lindsey Black, Tokushima



Candy! Throw it in



Chocolate! Throw it in

I'm from Texas originally, and in my family, we show love through food...lots of food. Love equals an extra pat of butter, a bigger scoop of ice cream, and just one more spoonful of sugar in ice cold sweet tea. Since coming to Japan, this expression of love comes in the form of care packages chock-full of homemade trail mixes, chocolate, candied pecans and other such deliciousness. Which would be great, if I didn't consistently find myself nibbling them alone at night—and by nibbling I mean inhaling—while watching *House of Cards*.

So what's a girl with too much love in the form of sugary goodness and too little willpower to eat in moderation to do? Spread that love! This yummy cookie bar recipe will help you get rid of unwanted care package goodies and holiday sweets, is vegan friendly, and can easily be made gluten-free. Enjoy!

Ingredients:

- 1 1/4 cup oat flour (or all-purpose flour, or even pancake mix)*
- 1/4 cup regular oats
- 1/3 cup brown sugar (use more or less depending on your taste)
- 1/4 tsp salt
- 1/4 tsp baking soda
- 1/4 tsp baking powder
- 1/2 tsp cinnamon
- 1/4 cup maple syrup or honey
- 2 tsp vanilla extract
- 3.5 tbsp room-temperature coconut oil*
- 1-3 tbsp milk of choice if dough isn't quite coming together

Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 350 F (180 C). Line an 8x8 baking dish with aluminum foil or parchment paper and grease with melted coconut oil. In a large mixing bowl, whisk together all dry ingredients.
2. In a medium sized bowl mix all wet ingredients.
3. Make a "crater" in your dry ingredients bowl and pour in wet ingredients. Mix until incorporated and add 1-3 tbsp milk of choice, if needed. Fold in mix-ins and pour dough into baking dish.
4. Bake for 25-35 minutes. Remove from oven and place on cooling rack for at least ten minutes before slicing into bars. Makes 9 to 12 bars.

Mix-ins and Variation Ideas!

Seriously, it's hard to go wrong here. My favorite combos so far include 1 cup peanuts and 1/4 cup each of raisins and dried blueberries for "PB&J bars." Or try 1 cup nuts of choice, plus 1 cup of chocolate chips, or chopped up Valentines' chocolates, etc.

If you're feeling brave, I even had success with two packages of Skittles and a chopped up white chocolate bar. Also, for extra nutty goodness in your bars, reduce the amount of coconut oil to 2.5 tbsp and add 2 tbsp of your favorite nut butter.

Notes:

- *To make oat flour, simply pour regular oats in a food processor and pulse until it becomes flour. Easy, *ne?*
- *In place of coconut oil, you could also use canola or vegetable oil, or even softened butter.
- *Inspired by Angela's Salt-Kissed Chunky Peanut Butter Vegan Chocolate Chip Cookies over at <http://ohsheglows.com>



Trail mix! throw it in

Lindsey Black is a first-year ALT out in scenic Tokushima, Shikoku. When she isn't baking or climbing tall things, you can probably find her Instagramming photos of baked goods and views from tall things. Follow her on Instagram @ rarareynolds

PICKLE PARADISE

Sterling Diesel, Nagasaki



Selection of vinegars at a grocery store

Tsukemono are a quintessential dish of Japanese cuisine. Chances are you eat them every week, but have you ever considered making your own? It's surprisingly easy, and not only will you preserve your favourite seasonal vegetables, but you'll send your Japanese friends over the moon with a jar of these Western-inspired treats.

All pickling solutions contain these basic ingredients: water, vinegar, salt, sugar, and spices. Believe it or not, but there's a cornucopia of vinegars in most Japanese grocery stores. You'd be amazed at what kinds of flavours you can create with them. On the other hand, Japan isn't the most spice-centric country. You should be able to find the basic pickling spices at your local grocery store, although caraway, dill, and cinnamon sticks may be elusive. It's best if you use whole leaves or seeds, but ground types work too. For hard-to-find spices, there's iherb.com or similar online ordering sites.

Here's an example of a basic pickling solution I use:

- ◆ 250mL water
- ◆ 250mL vinegar
- ◆ 1 osaji (tablespoon) salt
- ◆ 1 kosaji (teaspoon) sugar

To prep your vegetables, you want to wash and peel them. If possible, they should be cut into long strips and always under 5cm in thickness. Garlic can be left whole. Some people like to submerge vegetables in boiling water for a few seconds to sterilize them, but I prefer to let them sit covered in salt for a few hours. Salting vegetables with a lot of water content like tomatoes, onions, and celery is especially helpful in the pickling process.

Make sure you're working with sterilized jars. I submerge mine in boiling water for about 10 minutes to kill anything that might want to grow with my pickles. Don't forget to boil

the lid, too!

When you're putting your pickles into your jars, stop around every third and put some of your spices in as well. This way it's equally distributed. When your vegetables are all packed in, pour your pickling solution in as well! You may need to agitate the jar to remove any trapped air bubbles. Fill your jar to the brim and seal it.

From here, you can do two things: put the jar in your fridge for a week before reopening it and enjoying that sweet, tangy, homemade crunch! They should last for about 3 months this way. Your other option is actually canning your pickles. This requires a pressure cooker, but you can keep your pickles stored for years. I've been doing both methods and my results have been delicious all around. Don't forget to put a date on your jars so that you remember when you made them!

Here's some recommendations for different types of pickle projects you can take on!

Sauerkraut

Recommended additions:
Carrots, cucumbers, daikon, or radishes.

Good spices:
Chopped chilli peppers, cumin, and turmeric OR anise, dill, and rosemary.

Eat it:
With sausages, potatoes, fried fish, in dumplings, in okonomiyaki, or in a soup.

Cut your cabbage into fine shreds. Wash and strain the pieces. Any additional vegetables should be cut into equally thin pieces as well. Salt them and leave them for a few hours or overnight, then rinse them off. You want to really pack these treats into your jar!



Pickled onions in pink and others



Delicious bread and butters

"Bread and butter" pickles

Recommended additions:
Carrots, garlic, onion, daikon, eggplant, cauliflower, asparagus.

Good spices:
Peppercorns, lemon, lime, or yuzu slices, chopped chilli peppers, mustard seed, cumin, coriander, and turmeric.

Eat it:
With crackers and cheese, in sandwiches, salads, fried fish, or fried potatoes.

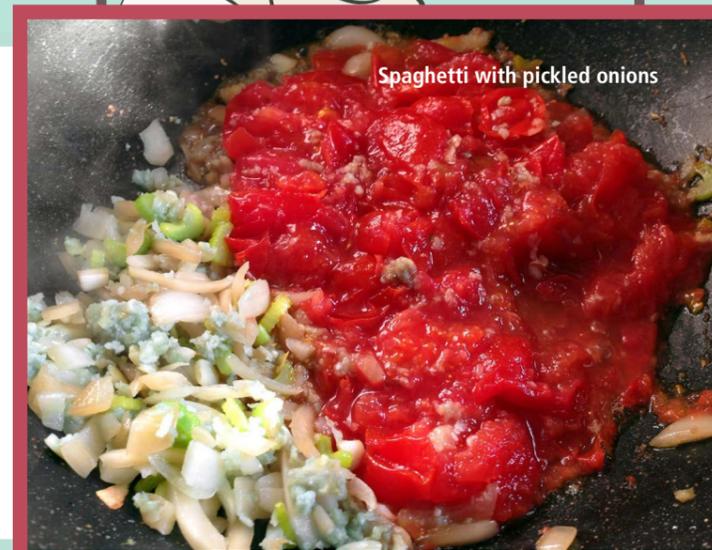
Cut your vegetables into long, thick strips as tall as your jar if possible. Salt them and rinse them off after a few hours or overnight. With these pickles, you can put in all of your spices before your vegetables.

Pickled onions

Good spices:
Whole peppercorns, dill, rosemary, bay leaf, coriander seed, oregano, and shiso.

Eat it:
In sandwiches, with chicken or anchovies, in croquettes, on toast, in addition to spaghetti sauce, or accompanying curries.

These are my new favourite pickles. I like to use dark vinegars with white and yellow varieties and light and sweet ones with red onions. Cut your onions into very thin slices and salt them either for a few hours or overnight. Pack them tightly into your jars. Two big onions will get you about a quart of pickles.



Spaghetti with pickled onions

SPORTS

EDITORIAL

The Case for Cycling

Many of us arrive at our new home in Japan and find that we no longer have access to the kinds of classes and sporting facilities that we used as a means of staying fit back home. Modern gyms with high-tech equipment, classes in ashtanga yoga and, in my case, Brazilian jiu-jitsu can no longer be found.

Over the past seven issues, I've run countless stories by JETs who have become involved with a new sport since arriving in Japan, and many of them for that reason. They found something new because it wasn't possible to continue exercising in the way they had previously. Many JETs take up running, which is completely understandable given that it's a great way to relieve stress, requires barely any specialist equipment, and can be done pretty much anywhere.

Although there are plenty of converts to running in the JET community, it still, in my experience at least, sharply divides opinion, so I'd like to point to cycling as an alternative to running. I've found that people generally have a more neutral opinion of cycling, which lends itself more to social events, such as the Annual Oita AJET Charity Bike Ride, than the typically solitary activity of running.

Cycling is now hugely popular, both as a means of transport and as a form of exercise, with the JETs in the area of north-west Kumamoto where I live. Like most of the JETs here, I hadn't owned a bike or been a cyclist before coming to Japan. When we first arrived, most of us rode around on *mamachari* bikes passed down by our predecessors. One by one, people upgraded to road bikes, most of which were bought at one of the town's two local bike shops.

Initially, people rode just around the local area individually, but as more and more ALTs upgraded their bikes, a small club, known as Tamana Biker's Club, was born. The club is comprised of JETs, non-JET ALTs and Japanese people living nearby, and even has



its own logo, which has been printed on t-shirts and patches. The club's first group ride, a 70 km round trip over the course of a morning and afternoon, was a massive success and another longer group ride is planned for the start of this month.

As an *inaka* JET, I feel like I've had a lot of freedom to cycle in a safe and clean environment. If you're living somewhere rural, I'd encourage you to consider it.

I know that when I leave the JET Programme at the end of July to live in a city, one of the things that I'll miss about my rural placement is the freedom to ride in a group like this.

THIS MONTH IN SPORTS...

With double-page articles on aikido, Brazilian jiu-jitsu and snowboarding, April's sports section is packing quite a punch.

The section starts with an article by Maggie Hill, who provides a great introduction to Japan's youngest martial art, aikido. She describes how she stumbled upon the sport that's now her passion here in Japan, and talks about its pacifistic philosophy and some of the techniques that it teaches. It's a great read for anybody considering taking up aikido.

Next up, Jess Bertubin, who wrote an article for the sports section back in December, describes the positive effect that training in Brazilian jiu-jitsu has had on her life. She talks about the friendships she's made through the art and also reflects on what she learned from a loss at recent tournament in Nagoya. Anybody with even a passing interest in martial arts should check it out.

Lastly, Jessica Perl has written a great article about travelling to Hokkaido from Kagoshima for a quick snowboarding holiday. She shares some of the highlights of her trip and has some great information about the peaks near her resort. It's essential reading for anybody thinking of embarking on a snowboarding holiday in Hokkaido.



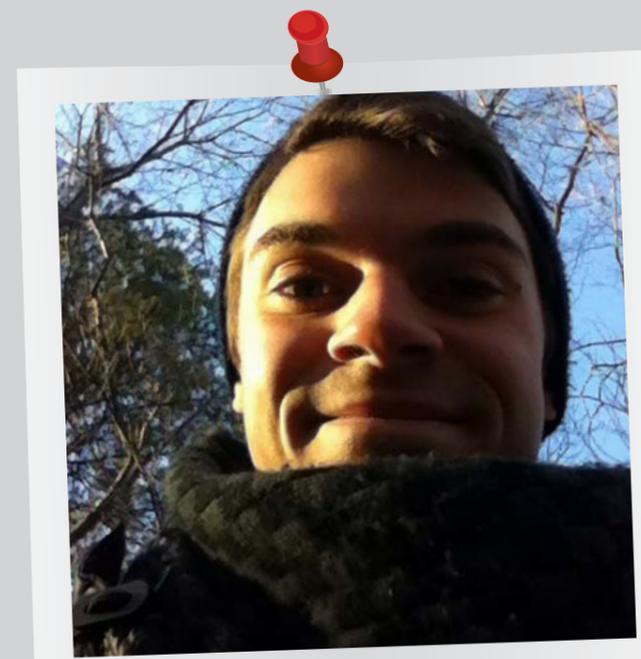
SPOTLIGHT

Christopher Carlsen, Zen Master of Shingo Night Basketball

Twice a week Chris walks the same path with the same intention: Shingo-mura night basketball. Before entering, he can hear the droning of inflated rubber colliding with hardwood floor, which is music to his ears.

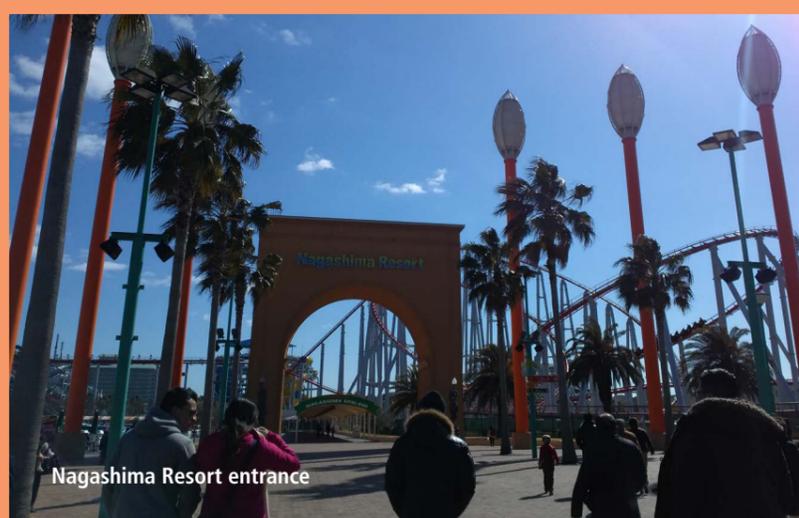
He finds an empty corner and begins the routine. It feels as natural as sleep. Mental anguish slips away, neurons fire at will. Insouciant motions slowly develop into a rhythmic trance, an athletic dance of zen unconsciousness.

Why does he love basketball? An accurate jumpshot requires total body cooperation. Energy flows down the body to the feet. Tiptoes push off the ground, not enough power, compensate, drive hard with the hips, get some torque, too much, compensate, relax the back, lower the angle of the arms, restrict the wrist, a little more, fingertips, the last chance, give it their all and push the globular aviatrix on her 'vol spécial'. Feet reunite with the ground; eyes transfixed on the ball, spinning, arcing. An eruption of nylon is his reward. The entire process lasts one second, the brain, merely an observer. This is his yoga, this is his t'ai chi, this is his chi kung. This is Shingo night basketball.



BRAZILIAN JIU-JITSU: LOSING TO WIN

Jess Bertubin, Okinawa



Nagashima Resort entrance



The budokan



The podium

There is a moment in every competition match where it becomes clearly evident who will win. This moment, reserved only for the competitors, is felt in the very first exchange, and immediately marks the champion. After that moment, the match becomes a question, not of who will win, but when.

I experienced this moment for myself in my first Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) competition in Okinawa (see my article in the December 2013 issue of *Connect*). It remains a vivid memory in my mind, feeling that surge of panic from my opponent when she realized what would become her eventual loss. To everyone else watching, it was a moment indistinguishable from the rest of the match. But for us, that moment signified that the match was already half over.

This past February, I experienced that moment again when I competed in the XI Copa Dumau BJJ tournament in Nagoya. Except this time, as I felt myself firmly trapped in my opponent's control, I was the one who realized that I was going to lose. I struggled desperately, but I knew, as did my opponent, that my resistance was futile. In the end, it took three minutes to confirm what we'd both realized in the first 30 seconds.

But every serious competitor knows that the match is won far before either competitor steps onto the mat. As the famous UFC welterweight champion Georges St-Pierre said, "Fights aren't won in the octagon, they're won in the months leading up to them, in a near-empty gym, in the lost hours of a day, whether I feel like it or not."

For months, I'd willingly lost hours to train BJJ since arriving in Okinawa, but in the beginning of the New Year, for weeks, I'd helplessly lost hours to illness instead. I'm not sure if it was coming back from winter holiday travels or over-training for the competition—perhaps it was a combination of both—but I suffered from colds throughout January. Then, just when I thought I was getting better, my health worsened with frightening speed and I had to be hospitalized.

I spent the first week of February at Heart Life Hospital hooked up to an IV, unable to eat and barely able to sleep. Despite my illness, I spent most of my waking moments thinking of BJJ, which served as a distraction from the pain. I practiced BJJ in my head, mentally reviewing techniques after taking medicine, visualizing my competition strategy while being examined. Once I began to

regain my energy, I did small exercises in my bed, being careful not to remove the IV from my arm.

I'd hoped that if I kept my mind in competition mode, my body would be able to catch up easily and I'd still have a chance of winning. But when I attended my first practice just five days after I'd been released from the hospital, I knew from my body's sluggish response and slow recovery that it would be impossible to get to competition readiness by the following week.

And so when I stepped onto the competition mat that day in Nagoya, a mere two weeks after my hospitalization, I already knew that I was going to lose. So why then, when I tapped and signaled my loss a mere three minutes into the match, did I have such a huge grin on my face?

Four days before the competition, James, my instructor, Eric, my teammate, and I landed in Nagoya to train with our sister gym in Chiryu before competing in the Copa Dumau. But what I'd expected to be a competition training camp ended up being more of a BJJ vacation. We trained, of course, but sessions were confined to the early morning and late evening, which left the majority of our time free for things unrelated to competition and BJJ.

For one, since none of us had to worry about our weight, we ate all of the Brazilian food we could get our hands on. Our gracious hosts, Arley (see 'Just Roll With It' in the Fall 2013 issue of the *Okijet 'Ryukyu Star'* magazine) and Thais, made us a home cooked meal our first evening, then proceeded to introduce us to things like Brazilian pizza, fried pastries and even their country's version of fruitcake. And, of course, there were plenty of acai drinks and treats to go around, which gave us plenty of energy, so we could eat, talk and laugh even more.

Want to know what we did the day before the competition? We spent the entire day at Nagashima Resort, going on every ride that we came across, enjoying the sun, short lines and each other's company. During the trip, I learned more about James and Eric, who became my *Vikings* brothers as we worked our way through the History Channel series, and I gladly added the always chilled pair of Arley and Thais to my growing BJJ family.

To call them 'family' is the only way I can describe them, especially the Nagoya branch of MY Team BJJ. How else could I

explain the warmth of the members' welcome at the Chiryu gym, making it so much easier to withstand the cold mats that froze our feet every practice? How else could I explain how, after only just meeting us, nearly a dozen of the team came to the Aichi Budokan to support us as we competed in the Copa Dumau?

I lost my competition match long before I'd stepped onto the mats not because of sickness, but because I'd chosen to think of BJJ in terms of winning and losing. Subscribing to that aggressively narrow point of view only impeded my learning and recovery, and also threatened to restrict my experience of BJJ.

Thankfully, my teammates, my family, reminded me that Brazilian jiu-jitsu has never been about winning or losing. That mindset focuses on *when*, but, in reality, BJJ focuses on *who*. The wonder of BJJ can be found in its practitioners, the great myriad of people we are able to meet while learning BJJ.

Since returning to Okinawa, I've been doing my best not to focus on winning or losing, but on staying relaxed during training. After all, sparring in BJJ is called 'rolling' for exactly that reason: to roll with whatever happens, to flow and not be stuck like a robot on one thing, even if that thing is the will to win. I've found that I've been able to apply many more techniques than before and have had much more fun training BJJ when I've been focused on simply enjoying the moment.

Yes, every competitor steps onto the mat with the intention of winning, but winning is not measured in points or medals. It's measured in those long hours leading up to the competition, in the connections made with people along the way, and the joy of the entire experience. And every competitor knows that those kinds of hours are well worth the loss.

Jess Bertubin is a first-year ALT from Hawaii, who was placed at Nishihara Senior High School in Okinawa apparently as reward for saving the world in a past life. She lives on the east side of mainland Okinawa, minutes away from the beach and south of the military base where she was born. Jess can be found busing around the island, wandering into restaurants to eat things she's never seen before. She trains Brazilian jiu-jitsu with MY Team Okinawa BJJ, located near Ryukyu University. Read more about her experiences and reflections on her website (RollingWithTheBigBoys.com) and Tumblr (rollingwiththebigboys.tumblr.com).



Maggie Hill, Tottori

AIKIDO: KICKING BUTT IN THE NAME OF LOVE

What do the Japanese police, Steven Seagal and yours truly have in common? We all train in one of Japan's youngest martial arts, aikido. Don't get me wrong. I'm by no means as athletic or talented as Seagal or the police. It's a small miracle that I, of all people, am writing an article for the Sports section, but since coming to Japan I've found a sport that I am really passionate about.

I discovered my local aikido group this past August almost by accident. Drawn by the sounds of screams and thwacks from a kendo class, my friend and I stumbled upon a dojo near our apartments. We hesitated near the front door until someone noticed us and welcomed us inside, where an aikido practice was just getting started. We were invited to join that practice, even though we'd just wandered in. We've been every week since.

Aikido was founded by Morihei Ueshiba in the 1920's, bringing together various jujitsu techniques and Ueshiba's personal philosophy. The goal of aikido is not to defeat enemies, but to solve conflicts without causing harm. It has been expressed as a form of love, even in the midst of battle. The pacifistic philosophy of aikido is very appealing to me; it's also popular among the Japanese police force, which uses aikido locks to safely detain criminals. "Hey there Mr. Yakuza. Now that you can't move a single muscle, let's talk about our feelings."

Aikido is a great method of self-defense. It can be used to disarm, throw, and pin opponents, and many techniques are designed for escaping an assailant's grip. The idea is to conserve energy by redirecting the attacker's movements. With some surprisingly slight adjustments, a student of aikido can avoid stab attempts and send opponents to the ground by the force of their own motion. In the higher levels of aikido, people practice using wooden knives, swords and staffs to simulate real-life dangerous situations.

Unlike other martial arts such as karate or kendo, aikido is not focused on developing body strength. Instead, aikido students channel their inner energy from their cores to their fingertips, which allows them to move with grace and precision. In action, it almost looks more like a dance than a fight, and can even be practiced by people with physical disabilities or who are confined to wheelchairs. While challenging, I find aikido to be very relaxing because there is no pressure to be strong or athletic; it's all about technique.

At my local dojo, the teachers and most of the students speak little English, but they seem very pleased that my friend and I are there. It's a great opportunity for us to practice our Japanese while learning a new skill, and we end up learning a lot through body language when our Japanese fails us. It's easy to learn the effectiveness of a move when you're pinned to the floor by a ten-year-old. Rumour has it, that nearby dojo have heard of us and are requesting that foreigners join their classes too.

Most dojo are linked to Aikikai, the aikido federation based in Tokyo that is currently led by Ueshiba's grandson. With some simple paperwork and a one-time fee, you can become an Aikikai member. Membership grants you an ID card and permission to take aikido level tests. You can take aikido tests every few months to gauge your progress, and it's very rewarding to receive an official aikido certificate when you reach the next level. There are five levels before you receive your black belt, so if you practice regularly you can potentially reach this level within a three year stay on the JET Programme.

My goal is to reach at least the fourth level during my stay in Japan. In my dojo, this will allow me to wear the black *hakama* (awesome samurai pants) that the upper level students and teachers have. Of course, if you prefer to practice casually, there is no pressure to take the tests or become an Aikikai member.

Whether you're interested in self-defense, personal training, or learning to tumble like a ninja, you should look for an aikido group near you. Aikido dojo can be found around the world, so if you start now you can continue when you return home. Besides, it's really cool to be able to say, "I learned this technique from a great Aikido master in Japan."

Sources:

Aikikai Foundation <http://www.aikikai.or.jp/eng/>
Aikido FAQ <http://www.aikidofaq.com/>

Maggie Hill is a gamer, bookworm and first year ALT in Tottori Prefecture. She enjoys hosting live radio shows and talking 'about' (sic) how much colder it is in Canada than in Japan. Check out Maggie's webcomic at www.lord-knows.com or listen to her radio shows on Radio KoL (<http://tinyurl.com/spaceyradio>).



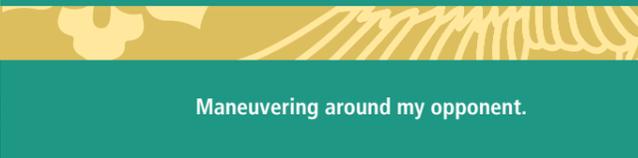
Going over the basics with Fukunaga Sensei.



Sending my opponent to the ground!



Here I'm practicing Shikko, a form of knee walking.



Maneuvering around my opponent.



Most techniques begin with escaping my opponent's grip.





36 HOURS AT RUSUTSU RESORT: SNOWBOARDING IN HOKKAIDO

Jessica Perl, Kagoshima

When my friend found a package through JAL Airlines that included airfare to Hokkaido, a bus to Rusutsu Resort, three one-day lift tickets, and a hotel room for three people for \$500, I was elated. I currently live on a small island in Kagoshima Prefecture that offers an array of activities, including surfing, windsurfing and scuba diving. However, having lived in Colorado before Japan, I miss snowboarding terribly. Just getting off this island, though, is usually a huge pain in the butt that involves a ferry ride or an expensive flight to the mainland, then another plane, train or bus to wherever the destination is. But with this package, suddenly a snowboarding trip seemed possible. The caveat, however, was that the package was only for two nights and three days. But as it would be our only chance to snowboard this season, my two friends and I packed our winter clothes and set off. Here's how our trip went and what the slopes at Rusutsu were like.

Wednesday, February 26th:

We left the island at 9 AM on a flight to Kagoshima City. We killed two hours at the airport, taking advantage of the free outside foot onsen, and then caught a flight to Tokyo. There, we had a 45-minute layover before our flight to Sapporo's Chitose Airport. Flying in at dusk, we could see miles of snow-covered fields below us, and the beckoning mountains in the distance energized our weary souls. Not wanting to waste time, we hurried to a recommended restaurant before our bus arrived to indulge in some famous Hokkaido dishes: crab and sea urchin rice bowls paired with salmon sashimi. Delicious.

After an hour and a half bus ride, we arrived at our hotel in Rusutsu. It's the type of resort that's basically a town in itself. There were multiple restaurants, a rental shop, a pool—complete with a water slide and a wave machine—two onsen, and even a merry-go-round.

The hotel lobby was decked out in marble, and the staff was attentive and helpful. We were a bit nervous about our room, because the package was so cheap, but it turned out to be great. The triple room had plenty of space for the three of us with all our bags. It was actually one of their Disney rooms and came

replete with stuffed characters. After unpacking, we rushed to the pool to ride the water slide and then stopped into a rather upscale bar for a nightcap. They had an assortment of cocktails, everything from margaritas to Long Island iced teas to glühwein. We went to bed after that, eager to hit the slopes the next day.

Thursday, February 27th:

After eating the buffet breakfast that was included in the package, we headed to the rental shop. For boots, board, and bindings, the cost was about \$80 for two days. Fully equipped, we walked the short distance to the lift. It being a weekday, there weren't really any crowds, so we hopped right on. Unfortunately, they hadn't had snow in a few days, but the sun came out, which softened everything up and made for spring-like conditions.

Rusutsu is an interesting mountain. It consists of three peaks, Mt. Isola and East Mt., which are connected, and West Mt., which is separated by a road and an amusement park that operates in summer. To get from West Mt. to the other two, there is a horizontal gondola that takes about 10-15 minutes. In total, Rusutsu has 18 lifts, four of which are gondolas. West Mt. was closest to where we were staying, so we checked that side out first. The groomers were nice, and there was a decently sized terrain park. I wanted to explore a section of tree runs that were over to the right, but unfortunately, the lift accessing that area wasn't running. That was quickly forgotten, though, when we arrived at the top of West Mt. and were stunned with views of Mt. Yotei, a breathtaking mountain that bears a slight resemblance to Mt. Fuji.

While taking pictures at the top, we met an Australian bloke who informed us the terrain was better on the other two peaks, so we decided to hop over there. We rode down and while looking for the gondola, found ourselves in the middle of the currently abandoned amusement park, the rides snow-covered and silent. After marveling at the slightly eerie scenery, we located the gondola and rode to the other side. After a couple of runs, my friends went to get lunch, but I continued to ride. The Australian fellow was right. Mt. Isola and East Mt. were better. The runs

were longer, they had more mogul slopes, and there were plenty of trees. It was amongst the trees where I stumbled across some powder. The moment I noticed that 'surfing on a cloud' sensation, I felt a rush of energy, and letting the music from my iPhone egg me on, wove between trees seamlessly. I had gotten what I came for.

I rode for the rest of the day, meeting up with my friends in time to catch the last gondola back to the other side, feeling tired but very happy. We relaxed in the hotel room for a couple of hours, but upon finding out that our day lift ticket was also good for riding at night, we decided to go back out and get a few more turns in. Only a few runs on West Mt. were open, and a lot of what had been soft and slushy in the afternoon sunlight was now crunchy and icy. The groomers were still fun, though, so we cruised around on those before heading in to grab dinner.

Friday, February 29th:

Friday was our last day, and we had only a half-day to ride before catching the bus back to the airport. To my delight, it was snowing, but I quickly realized that there was only a thin layer of powder covering the frozen, crunchy snow from the night before. Despite now having to steer clear of the moguls and trees, the groomers provided me with enough variation to enjoy my last few runs.

Driving back to the airport in the daytime, we were able to see some of the magnificent mountain scenery I so frequently long for. I still remember passing by a majestic lake rimmed with craggy, snow-capped peaks. Once in the airport, we had just enough time for a bowl of Hokkaido's famous miso ramen, which was absolutely amazing. The spices were just right, the broth wasn't too oily, and it warmed my whole body. Ramen perfection. I drifted off to sleep on the plane to Kagoshima imagining the next time I would be on a board.

This type of travel, as my friends informed me later, is called a *dangan* (bullet) tour in Japanese, which basically means a whirlwind trip. Despite it being hectic, having the chance to snowboard this season was definitely worth the craziness. While I wouldn't call Rusutsu my favorite mountain, I feel that it's a good resort with a lot to offer all types of riders. Also, Niseko is only about 30-40 minutes away, so if the snow at Rusutsu sucks, you can pop over there instead.

Jessica is a 2nd-year ALT from New York currently living on Okinoerabu Island in Kagoshima. Island life makes her extremely happy, and she loves taking advantage of the many unique activities available on Erabu, like windsurfing, caving, and hula dancing. Together with the wonderful group of friends she has made, she also likes to hold various types of parties—including, but definitely not limited to—pizza parties, beach parties, DJ parties, and dance parties.



Off the island we go!



Happy to be back in the snow



Some of the elusive powder



Hokkaido miso ramen



48



49



TRAVEL

EDITORIAL The MH370 Mystery

When Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 vanished on March 8 with 239 people on board less than an hour after takeoff, it sparked one of the most puzzling mysteries of modern aviation history. In the month since its disappearance, search and rescue teams have scoured vast miles of ocean and conspiracy theories have raged across the internet.

As blurry satellite images of debris floating in the Indian Ocean began surfacing, the search moved to an area west of Australia, yet, still no confirmation it was wreckage from a plane.

Why then, were the families of those on board sent a text message on March 24 saying their loved ones had perished? "... we have to assume beyond any reasonable doubt that MH370 has been lost and that none of those on board survived...all evidence suggests the plane went down in the southern Indian Ocean," the message said in English according to CNN.com. The news site detailed hysterical scenes at the subsequent press conference in Beijing, with one relative rushing out of the room, screaming, "Is it really confirmed? What's your proof?" The next day, hundreds of friends and family members of passengers marched to the Malaysian Embassy in Beijing to express their anger and frustration, claiming they weren't being told the truth. On March 27, Malaysia Airlines ran a full-page advertisement in a major Malaysian newspaper offering its condolences to the loved ones of the 239 passengers and crew.

The families—on a rollercoaster ride of grief and desperate hope with every new message and satellite image—are frustrated at the lack of concrete information. Justifiably, they are demanding the one thing missing from Malaysia Airlines' official version of events: hard evidence.

Angry protests have broken out in Beijing, and Chinese relatives have lashed out at what they believe to be delays and cover-ups that have wasted time and resources. Reuters reported that Chinese families denounced Malaysia Airlines, the Malaysian government and military as the "real executioners" who "killed" their loved ones. Meanwhile, latimes.com wrote that "all things Malaysian" are being boycotted in China in protest of what many consider a bungled investigation.

Certainly the families of passengers have the right to be upset, and perhaps their accusations of a cover-up will be confirmed—at the time of writing it's just as likely as any other theory, given the lack of any actual evidence. However, the Malaysian transportation minister Hishamuddin Hussein does have a point when he says that it's not just the Chinese who lost loved ones. There were passengers from 14 other countries, including Australia, France, India, Indonesia, New Zealand, Russia, Taiwan and the US—all countries that are part of the 26-nation search dedicated to finding out what happened. Surely between their combined resources and an urgent need to find answers for their own citizens, a cover-up would have been quickly exposed?

It does seem odd, however, that Malaysia Airlines is officially stating the plane went down in the Indian Ocean leaving no survivors, without a single shred of evidence that actually happened—at least none it is sharing with the rest of the world. A tactless response in the face of global pressure or something more sinister? What do you think?

connect.travel@ajet.net

THIS MONTH IN TRAVEL...

Many of you may be already in the midst of planning your life post-JET, and it's inevitable you'll be thinking about squeezing in a bit more travel—either within Japan, as you make your way home, or as an alternative to going home. One option you might be considering is volunteering—perhaps putting your English teaching skills to good use elsewhere, or working on a construction project in a developing country. In this issue, Dan Ayres, Amanda Marcroft and Natalie Toombs share their experiences combining holidays with volunteering in an effort to give back to the communities that have welcomed them. Our Compassionate Travel feature also takes a look at the other side of the coin—when volunteering does more harm than good—and Amanda Horton provides some tips on how to choose a good project.

If you are looking for a unique experience right here in Japan, Kira Conley takes us on an old-fashioned train journey in her article From Hakodate With Love. Jessie Giddens dips her toes in the new footbath shinkansen—yes, really!—in our Spotlight, while I delve into the mystery of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 in my editorial.



Want to write for Connect?
Drop me a line at connect.travel@ajet.net
Happy reading!

SPOTLIGHT



Yamagata's New Shinkansen Foot Onsen—yes, really! Jessie Giddens, Yamagata

Travel on Japan's world-famous bullet trains is usually quite extravagant, but beginning in July this year, the Yamagata Shinkansen is offering a whole new kind of *omotenashi*, or hospitality: foot baths while traveling at 130km an hour. The new trains, called Toreiyu, will shine with a new purple, red, yellow and white color scheme. Decals of Yamagata's famous produce and nature will be featured as well. Travelling from Fukushima station to Shinjo station, passengers within the six cars can enjoy luxurious tatami flooring, a bar and tables featuring wood made from Yamagata's cherry trees, and relaxing foot baths.

The concept was designed by Yamagata native, Ken Okuyama, as a means to bring hospitality to visitors of Tohoku and Yamagata. There are 11 stops on the 150km journey, each with its own drawcard. Here are a few stop highlights to help you plan your trip:

- ◆ Yonezawa – Try famous Yonezawa beef, or watch the annual Uesugi festival where locals reenact samurai battles.
- ◆ Takahata – Taste ice wine from Takahata's famous winery.
- ◆ Kaminoyama Onsen – Admire the beautiful Kaminoyama Castle, or visit filming locations from the Academy Award-winning movie *Departures*.
- ◆ Yamagata – From Yamagata's capital city, take a short bus ride to hike at Mt. Zao and see the spectacular azure water

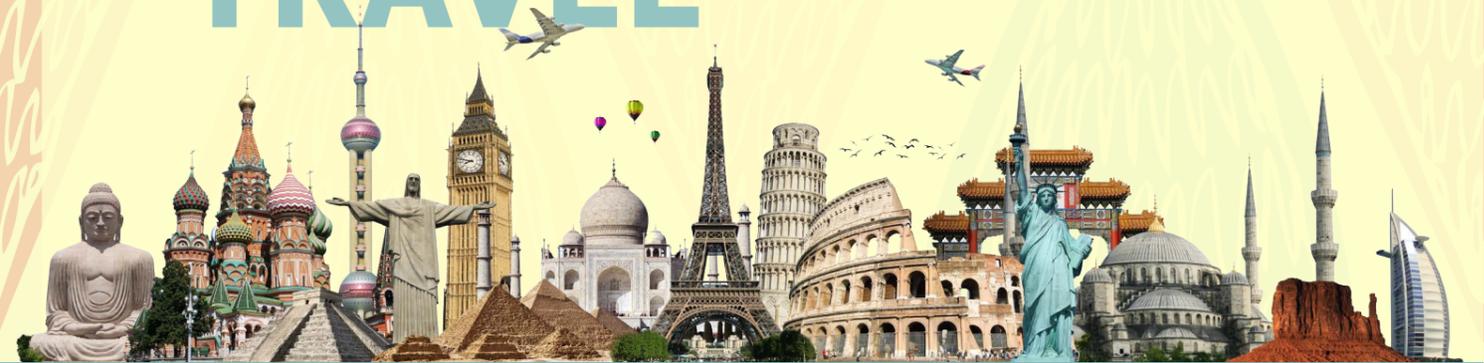
of Okama Crater, or enjoy Yamagata's most famous festival, Hanagasa.

- ◆ Sakuranbo-Higashine – As the name suggests, Higashine is famous for cherries. Go cherry picking!
- ◆ Shinjo – From here, transfer to the Rikku west-bound train, and then enjoy a river boat ride down the Mogami River.



Foot bath area

COMPASSIONATE TRAVEL



Combining travel and volunteering can be an incredibly rewarding experience. As travellers, it allows us to give something back to the communities that have welcomed us and, undertaken responsibly, it can enrich the lives of the people we help. Here, three readers share their experiences.

A Kuala Lumpurian Christmas

Dan Ayres, Nagasaki

The striking blend of vibrant cultures was part of what enticed me to Malaysia. It is a country noted for its variety, with colourful Malay, Indian and Chinese cultures intermingling. This unique blend has resulted in a rich history, beautiful architecture and, for me, the primary draw: outstanding food. I had heard tales of a cuisine rich in spice, flavour and variety. Any time I met someone who had gorged upon Malaysian cuisine, they practically salivated—with eyes glazed over—as they spoke of sampling *rendang* or *curry mee*. I knew that I had to follow suit and embark on my own foodie adventure in Malaysia.

My first few days in Kuala Lumpur were spent doing just that. I dined on fiery curries served on banana leaves and feasted on sumptuous street food. Yet I was keen to give a little back to this city which was offering so much. It was late December and, as Christmas Day approached, the opportunity arose to volunteer my services in a soup kitchen. After Skyping my Mum, who described the venture as “very noble,” I was ready to get stuck in.

The Pertiwi Soup Kitchen is an incredibly efficient service run by volunteers, providing wholesome grub for Kuala Lumpur’s homeless community. Volunteers don’t need to register their interest;

rather they are advised to “turn up with a smile.” The service makes stops at several stations around the city; each lorded over by the shimmering, iconic Petronas towers. Volunteering with the Pertiwi Soup Kitchen was a rewarding opportunity that gave me the chance to see another side of KL. At the first station, I observed as the vehicle swiftly transformed into a dispensing unit, with volunteers delegated different duties such as handing out drinks and snacks—there was a notable absence of soup. Initially, the volunteers outweighed the tasks that needed undertaking, so I made it my duty to clean up the abandoned polystyrene cups that littered the scene. At one point, I noticed a poor chap’s paper bag had disintegrated, so in a mad rush to be helpful, I ran to the soup van and requested another bag, massively getting in the way and receiving a stern—but deserved—telling off.

At the next station I was upgraded from litter picker-upper to drinks dispenser. I was armed with a giant jug of “syrup,” a sickly sweet revitalising concoction, and a large funnel. At times I was over zealous with my pouring and subsequently flooded the trotters of the poor fellow in front of me. Fortunately, the sodden-footed victims took it in good humour. I heartily wished each recipient a “Merry Christmas”, which may have meant little in a predominantly Muslim country, but thankfully the seasonal wish was beamed back at me.

Whilst Malaysia is one of the wealthier Southeast Asian countries, living on the streets remains a reality for many. Those diligently queuing were a mixture of recent immigrants, families living on the bread-line and individuals who had fallen on hard times. The Pertiwi Soup Kitchen ensured that four



Dan



Food in Kuala Lumpur



Soup kitchen

nights a week, these folk had a place to go to get fed, and the accompanying medical vehicle tended to any ailments they may be suffering from. Working with the soup kitchen was also a great chance to meet KL locals.

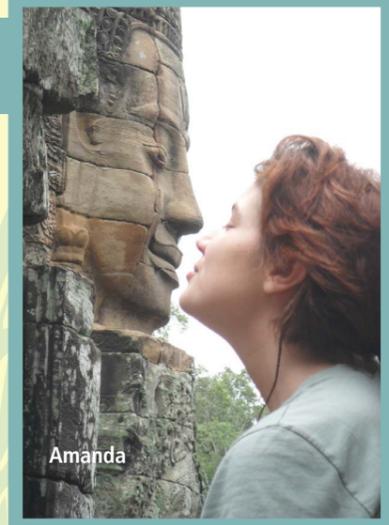
Only when every last nutritional nugget had landed in grateful hands could the vehicles pack up and call it a night. Then, in an odd series of events that included being driven to a place called “Club Gentleman,” a tower of beer and another disorientating car journey, I found myself in a heaving KL night spot accompanied by Thai girls frolicking in Christmas outfits. The contrast between the humbling soup kitchen and the frenzied decadence of KL nightlife was eye-opening to say the least, but served as a reminder of the glorious twists and turns travelling can offer.

Whether it’s a frantic evening helping out on the streets of KL, or something altogether more rustic, volunteering your services whilst travelling will undoubtedly enrich your overall experience in a country. Just be careful to mind your jugs and funnels. You can learn more about Pertiwi Soup Kitchen [here](#).

Dan Ayres is a second-year ALT living in Omura. His experiences of travelling began at an early age with his somewhat dysfunctional family. Born in Uganda, he was whisked around the world as a child, which on reflection was not dissimilar to the Wild Thornberries, minus the posh talking monkey. On returning to the rolling hills of Devon, England, the adventures continued in a bright yellow VW camper van, which he remembers catching fire on more than one occasion. He undertook the obligatory “Gap Yah” when he was 19, embarking on a journey through Nepal, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia. It was whilst volunteering at the Tashi Waldorf School in Kathmandu that he first came to hear about the JET Programme.

Cambodian Connections

Amanda Lynn Marcroft, Aomori



Amanda

In late winter 2011, I saw an advertisement for volunteer teaching in Cambodia. It included TEFL certification and housing and, while it was a tad expensive, something about that tiny two-inch ad had me curious.

I ended up spending three weeks in Phnom Penh during the muggiest part of the year and loved every second of it. I stayed in a rundown guesthouse in the city center with a couple of other volunteers, and Monday to Friday we trekked out to our school, which was adjacent to the trash mountain the kids lived in.

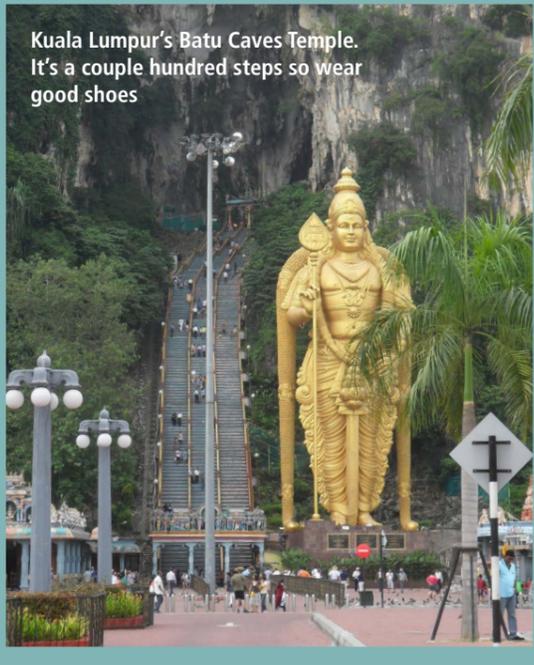
At first, it was daunting, but the kids were delightfully friendly right from the start and the Khmer teachers were eager to talk and take me on various excursions at the slightest hint of interest. We spent one Saturday at the best rescue zoo I’ve ever been to and even went to a crocodile farm—though I’m sure people thought I was a bit crazy for doing it. On the weekends I went exploring. I saw the palace, the temples, the markets, and all the other touristy things, but teaching and staying there so long really allowed me to have experiences the average traveler might miss. I went to the Khmer-only markets in search of school supplies—trying to explain accordion files using only gestures and enthusiasm was interesting!—and I learned about Cambodian history from the people who lived it, while listening to the Khmer Rouge trials on an old radio. I got a glimpse of real Cambodian life that I couldn’t have experienced any other way and everyone I talked to was incredibly nice, especially when they heard why I was there.

Of course, I didn’t spend all summer in Phnom Penh. Getting to Cambodia to begin with was a bit of a roundabout trip anyway,



My classroom in Cambodia during a rare quiet period

Kuala Lumpur's Batu Caves Temple. It's a couple hundred steps so wear good shoes



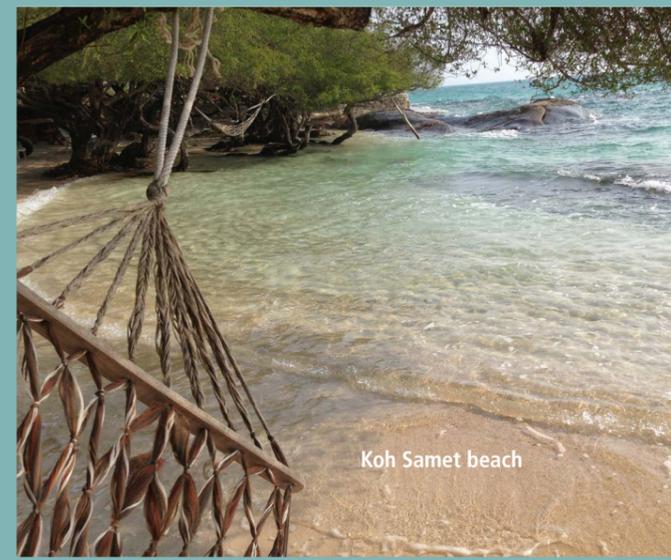
Thailand: The Land of Smiles

Natalie Toombs, Yamagata

Last December, I had the amazing experience of travelling and volunteering in Thailand. My journey began when I met 14 other ALTs in Bangkok. We took a six-hour van ride to the small village of Sangkhlaburi, located near the Myanmar border in western Thailand. We stayed in Sangkhlaburi for one week where we volunteered at Baan Unrak Primary School, Baan Unrak Children's Home, and Baan Dada Children's Home.



Natalie



Koh Samet beach

Want to volunteer on your next holiday? Read this first.

Amanda Horton, Kyoto

Voluntourism has been gaining momentum as a way for people to combine a love of travel with a desire to give back. While it is indeed a good thing, there can also be serious negative impacts that should be considered before signing up with any volunteer group. Not all ideas are well thought out and they can leave poorer communities worse off.

Take Oxfam's unwrapped campaign, for example. People donate money to buy farm animals for starving families that would, in turn, help the family make a living. Sounds great, right? Not exactly. The families often have no idea how to care for the animals, nor can they afford to feed them. This leads to the animal eating all available vegetation, damaging the land, without producing enough to cover the costs of its upkeep.

Another good example is the practice of building schools and hospitals in remote villages. Eager volunteers arrive, build something, and then leave thinking they've made a real difference without even considering one major problem: who's going to teach the village children when no one in the village has an education? Where are the doctors and medicine to stock the hospital? All too often, the building is left to stand derelict in the village, a constant reminder of crushed hopes.

If you're thinking about taking a voluntourism trip, do your research! Volunteer for a group which has a permanent presence in the area, that way you know that when you leave you won't be abandoning the people you are trying to help. Utilise the internet; find testimonials and projects the organisation has completed. Think clearly and logically about where you want to go, what you want to achieve, and who you want to help, and then find an organisation that fits. Voluntourism can be a hugely rewarding and beneficial act when done well. Good luck!

For some responsible volunteer organisations, check out the following:

- www.projects-abroad.org/
- www.transitionsabroad.com/
- www.comhlamh.org/volunteeringoptions/
- www.ethicalvolunteering.org/
- <http://www.volunteerguide.org/>

Amanda Horton was a Yamagata JET for 3 years before moving to Kyoto last summer to study Immunology. When she's not in the lab, she spends her time taking a ridiculous amount of photos of her cat and occasionally trying to save the world. She likes to spend her holidays volunteering at Animal Friends Niigata (AFN).

so I took full advantage. I started in Bangkok, touring the temples by day, then, at night practicing my haggling skills at the markets. I then flew into Siem Reap, the old capital of Cambodia and home to some of the best temple ruins in the world—see *Tomb Raider* if you're in doubt! I could have wandered those ruins for days without getting bored. The city itself, while sleepy during the day, really came alive at night. It is easily one of my favorite places in the world and it's very easy to take a bus to Phnom Penh.

When it came time to leave Cambodia I hopped a plane to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia where I saw yet more temples as well as their fabulous bird park. And if you like malls, KL is the place to be, they are absolutely massive. Overall, it was a fantastic experience to both travel and really interact with a community; I only hope to have such a great opportunity again.

www.i-to-i.com/volunteer

Amanda Lynn Marcroft is a first year ALT in the Blue Forest, also known as Aomori Prefecture. She prides herself on her chocolate chip cookies and her stories that begin with "I was so lost when...." After surviving the winter in Japan's frigid north, her current goal is to go horseback riding in Mongolia.

During our time at Baan Unrak, we participated in the annual community cleanup, taught English lessons, played games, watched the school's sports tournament, and performed *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* as part of their Christmas talent show. On Christmas day, we handed out presents to the children. It was a day of laughing, fun, and feeling thankful.

On the last day, eight of us joined a jungle tour, where we interacted with elephants, before rafting down a river surrounded by stunning scenery. After our week in Sangkhlaburi, three of us headed to the beautiful island of Ko Samet, south of Bangkok, for some fun in the sun. We stayed in a cozy beach house right on the water. The weather was sunny and warm, great for swimming and relaxing in hammocks. Delicious food and fresh fruit every morning made it hard to leave—it was a fabulous few days.

We were back in Bangkok for New Year's Eve, which we welcomed with live music and a huge fireworks show. While in Bangkok, we visited the Grand Palace, Wat Pho with the Reclining Buddha, and Wat Saket (Golden Mount). All the temples were amazing and within an easy taxi or tuk-tuk ride from each another.

The food in Thailand is reasonably priced and very delicious, especially the Pad Thai! For an unforgettable shopping experience, I recommend the floating market in Ratchaburi. Here, vegetables,

fruits, and various other merchandise are sold from boats. Aside from the canal shopping, there are many souvenir and clothing store full of bargains!

This trip was exciting, amusing, and rewarding. Combining volunteering with traveling is a wonderful way to meet interesting people from all over the world and to give back to the community. It is humbling to get to know the local people, to see how they live and to help out in any way possible. Touring around Thailand gave me a new appreciation for their culture. The Thai people are so kind and are always smiling. I can't wait to go back!

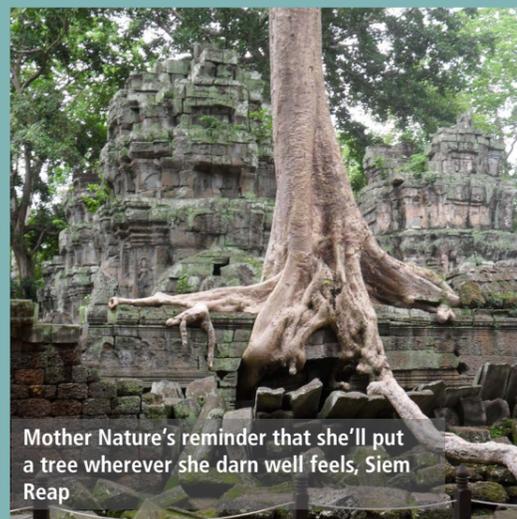
<http://www.baanunrak.org/>
<http://baandada.org/>

Natalie Toombs is a first-year JET from Prince Edward Island, Canada, based in Shinjo City, Yamagata Prefecture. Her interests include playing the saxophone, cooking, traveling, volunteering and enjoying Japanese tea ceremony. She played *Anne of Green Gables* in a Japanese film when she was eight and feels Japan will always be her second home.

Additional information by Dusty Wittman, Shiga



Sangkhlaburi view



Mother Nature's reminder that she'll put a tree wherever she darn well feels, Siem Reap

FROM HAKODATE WITH LOVE

Kira Conley, Saitama

Speeding along the tracks, listening to the soft hum of the train, I look out the window to catch a brief glimpse of a starry sky. Suddenly, the bright street lights of a town shock my eyes as they flash by. I'm sipping wine and munching on salty snacks, and the only thing that drowns out the undulating sound of the train on the tracks is loud laughter from within my cabin. This is not transportation. In fact, the word "transportation" itself demeans the very existence of the Cassiopeia sleeper train, where the experience of traveling from one destination to another is just as exciting as the destination itself.

Sleeper trains seem to be a relic of the past, only seen in Bond movies where tuxedos and evening gowns lead to a gun chase through train cars and a quintessential fist fight on the roof. But the Cassiopeia sleeper train offers all the luxury of Bond, with none of the brawls—whether that's a good or bad thing is up to you.

Your adventure will begin one month before you plan to board the train. There is no online reservation or pre-booking service. Tickets go on sale at all JR ticket offices exactly one month in advance and sell out within hours of opening, due to the popularity and the infrequency of the trains. So when we showed up the first time, two weeks before we wanted to take the train, we walked away empty-handed, save for some kind advice from a JR employee that we should try again a month before we want to travel. Having done more research, we changed our dates and returned with a new plan.

There are two options for sleeper trains to the north of Japan: the Hokutosei and the Cassiopeia. Both travel from Tokyo to Hokkaido, calling in at various stops in Tohoku along the way. The main difference between the trains is the price. The older Hokutosei train has less expensive, and more varied, sleeping options. Rooms start at 24,650 yen per person for the B-Class Duet, which includes a bunk bed, and go up to 35,530 yen per person for the A Royal Class, which features two beds, toilet, shower and sink. The main draw of this train is that it is the last of the "blue sleeper" trains in Japan. Once a regular sight on railways; this historic train is now a magnet for snap-happy tourists.

By the time we reached the ticket office, a month before our planned day of departure and with sales having only been open five hours, all the Hokutosei tickets had sold out. So we forked out the extra money to pay for the more expensive Cassiopeia, at 31,700 yen per person.

The Cassiopeia is the more modern of the two trains. It has a dining car and a viewing car, and each room has two beds, a television, bathroom, sink and table (oh, and a complimentary drink!). Although this method of travel is expensive—especially when you could probably fly abroad for that price—the experience of what seems to be a dying concept is definitely worthwhile. After all, what is better than enjoying the "going to" just as much as the "being there"?

TRAVEL DIARY: OMIYA TO HAKODATE AND BACK AGAIN

Friday

- 4.45 PM: Board the Cassiopeia train, bound for Hakodate.
Tip: Purchase a bento and supplies to take on the train to avoid the expensive meal, which you must pre-book.

Saturday

- 5.00 AM: Disembark train at Hakodate Station and take our luggage to the hotel.
Tip: The Comfort Inn is cheap, close to the station and includes a delicious breakfast.

Day:

- Walk around Asaichi, the morning fish market. Enjoy a delicious Japanese-style breakfast and try freshly-cooked crab samples from the street.
- Sip fresh melon smoothies while chatting with the locals, who are friendlier and warmer than those from Tokyo, despite their cold environment.
- Take the street car around town to the old district. Visit the old Public Hall and have tea at the old British Consulate—there's a great museum inside as well!

Noon:

- Head back to the hotel for a quick nap.

Evening:

- Take a bus to the see Hakodate's famous night view.
- Dinner at the Beer Hall in the Red Brick district.

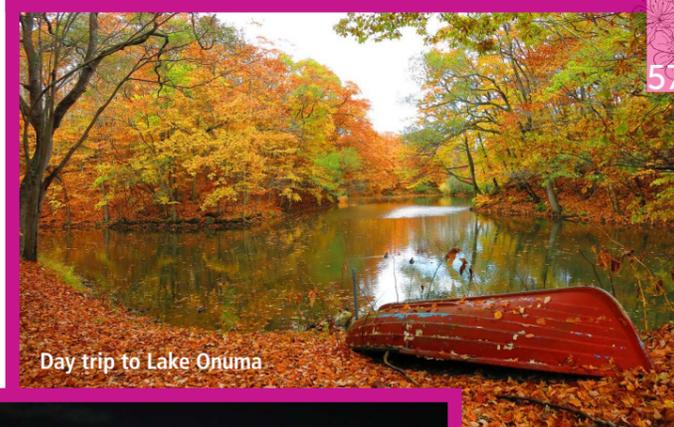
Sunday

- Take a train to Onuma Lake area and enjoy a 50-minute walk around the lake.
Tip: We were deceived by a map from the tourist information center that said Lumber, an amazing local steak restaurant, was within walking distance. It's not, so take a taxi if you go. It is highly recommended, with portions of meat that make you feel like you are on a farm, not in Japan.

- Hitch-hike from the restaurant back to the station.
- Return to Hakodate and venture to the Yunohama Hotel in the Yunokawa onsen area for a relaxing soak with an ocean view.
- Dinner at Funny Pierrot burger shop.

Monday

- Walk to the morning market for a breakfast of ice cream made from Hakodate cream.
- Shopping in the Red Brick district.
- Lunch at Ajisai for famed Shio ramen.
- 3:55 PM: Board the shinkansen back to Omiya.



Source: http://www.jreast.co.jp/e/routemaps/cassiopeia_hokutosei.html

Kira Conley is a third-year JET in Saitama prefecture, famous for its proximity to Tokyo. When she isn't baking up a storm in her oven/grill/toaster/magic box, she's enjoying the finer things in life, like yoga and watching movies.

VOLUNTEERING

EDITORIAL Update on JETs Rally for Tohoku Fundraiser Casey Mochel, Hyogo (2005-2008)

Tuesday, March 11th marked the 3-year anniversary of the worst disaster to hit Japan in recent history. 3.11 is a date that few people connected with Japan will ever forget. This is particularly true for alumni of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET Program) – a unique program organized by the Japanese government that hires recent college graduates from all over the world to be assistant language teachers and international relations coordinators for local prefectural governments.

During the earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011, two JET participants lost their lives: Monty Dickson and Taylor Anderson. The families of these JETs have worked hard to share their stories and help the devastated communities where their loved ones lived and died. In particular, the Taylor Anderson Memorial Fund was created to support the students and schools in Ishinomaki and the Tohoku region.

Since 2011, JET participants and alumni worldwide have also worked to support the disaster response, so far raising over \$500,000 for the relief and recovery effort. As part of this effort, the JET Alumni Association USA created a relief fund that has distributed almost \$90,000 in grants for educational programs in the disaster zone. This year, JETs mobilized again to support the Taylor Anderson Memorial Fund with an online fundraising campaign entitled JETs Rally for Tohoku. In the first 24 hours, starting at midnight on March 11, 2014, Japan time, JET alumni, current JET participants, and friends around the world contributed more than \$20,000 through Global Giving, an internationally recognized donation website. These funds were raised through social media and word of mouth, as well as through events in San Francisco and elsewhere around the United States.

By March 18, one week later, a total of 333 people had donated \$24,238. Global Giving has pledged to match these donations, bringing the total mobilized to more than \$48,000—a formidable sum demonstrating the commitment of the global JET community to the recovery of the Tohoku region. These funds will be used for a series of initiatives supported by the Taylor Anderson Memorial Fund: a community library for students in hard-hit Ishinomaki, scholarships for local students, and PTSD training to assist area residents.

The JETs Rally for Tohoku fundraising website on Global Giving will be left open for regular donations which means JETs can continue to spread the word, raise funds and support the people of Japan – a country close to all of their hearts.

For more information, please visit (click on the list):

- JETs Rally for Tohoku
- Taylor Anderson Memorial Fund
- JET Alumni Association USA

Questions can be directed to Casey Marie Mochel at us1.jetaausa@gmail.com.

THIS MONTH IN VOLUNTEERING...

It's finally April and with the new cherry blossoms comes some new Connect articles in the Volunteering section. In this month's edition we have our Editor and chief, Steven Thompson from Fukushima, writing about how you can contribute to your community by donating blood. It is easier than you think once you get the courage to face the needle and fill out some translated forms.

Second we have Casey Mochel, with the JETAA in NY, giving us an article about the JETs Rally for Tohoku fundraiser. The JET community and GlobalGiving partnered up and raised just under \$50,000 for recovery efforts in Tohoku.

Lastly we have Scott Kominkiewicz from Hokkaido sharing his experience about volunteering with the Hokkaido English Challenge (HEC). The HEC is an all-ALT-run summer camp and includes a scholarship fund to send students to study English abroad. The summer camp creates a fun learning environment for the students to be immersed in conversational English and learn about different cultures.

Let us know what you're doing in the community at connect.volunteering@ajet.net!



SPOTLIGHT

Know someone doing something outstanding in the Volunteering community? Nominate them for the Spotlight at connect.volunteering@ajet.net!



FUKUSHIMA ALT BLOOD DRIVE

Steven Thompson, Fukushima

Last November, 15 brave souls gathered in the central Fukushima city of Koriyama to save the lives of others.

Well, they didn't exactly run into a burning building and carry people out on their backs, but they did sign up to give blood. For the people it helps, donated blood can save lives. Aside from emergencies and transfusions, donated blood is also used in life-saving medical research and drug manufacturing. The often-quoted figure is that one whole-blood donation saves the lives of 3 other people, but it can be more, and it certainly means much more.

Donating blood is an important cause to me, and I organized this blood drive event for two reasons. 1) To show the ALTs in Fukushima that it is not only possible, but relatively easy for us to donate blood, once we met some requirements and translated forms; and 2) To show Fukushima that we support them, and that just because we're here temporarily doesn't mean we don't want to contribute in a real way.

For all my seriousness, the event itself was actually a great deal of fun! We all first gathered at a buffet for a huge lunch. Once we'd stuffed ourselves completely full of carbs and protein, we waddled over to the blood center, which had extra staff on hand to make sure things went smoothly. Two staff members from the Fukushima Red Cross main office came down to offer English assistance as well. The Tokyo Head Branch even got involved, sending collaborating documents, and their heartfelt thanks.

The donation process went well, if slowly. The center we went to has only two computers for entering new donor information, but we did everything we could to print out information and the questionnaires ahead of time. Some people were not able to donate due to medical history, recent travel, or general ineligibility. In order to ensure blood is collected and distributed safely, they have to be very strict and exceedingly careful. Most people who receive transfusions have weakened immune systems and are particularly vulnerable. Even still, 6 people donating whole blood means that potentially 18 lives could be saved! That's pretty incredible.

Recently, I sent completed English materials to the Fukushima JRC office for them to begin reviewing and distributing to the centers in Fukushima for English-speaking donors. Because of this, the Tokyo Red Cross decided to begin printing and distributing official English materials. I must say, I'm pretty happy that the hours I put into sitting with a dictionary and translating medical terminology on pages of forms paid off!

If you're in the Tohoku area and interested in donating, feel free to get in touch with me and I'll let you know when the next event will be (we're currently looking at early May). Interested in donating blood or organizing your own blood drive event? Check out the next page for more information.



The wonderful people who came to donate and support

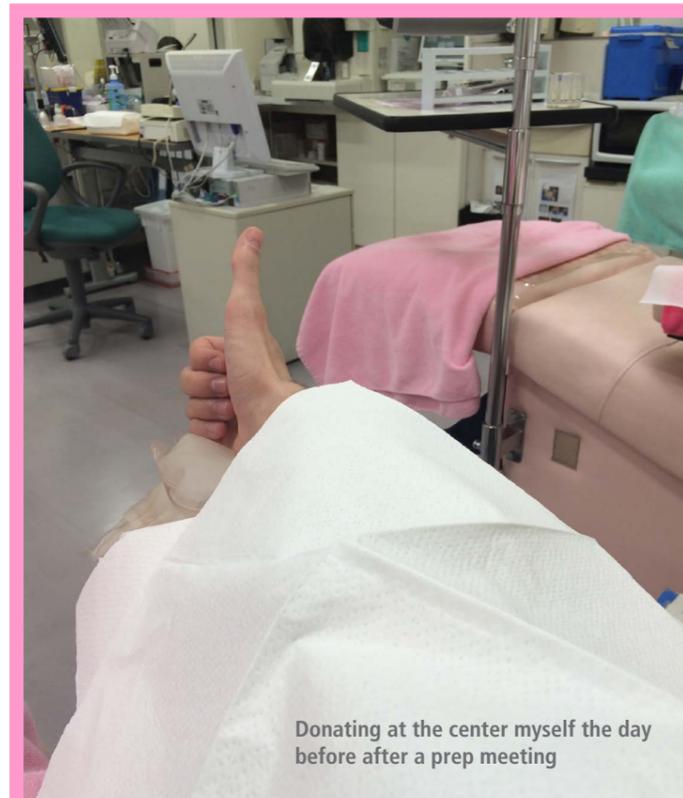
Kenketsu-chan, the adorable mascot powered by your blood(...)



Donating Blood in Japan

Recently, it has become easier for foreign residents in Japan to donate blood via the Red Cross and other blood centers. Clearer rules and more informed staff mean that fewer foreigners are turned away outright, which was a problem even 5 years ago. Even today, some centers (especially in smaller towns) may be hesitant to take you in. You have to understand that, while donating blood is a completely safe process, it still involves a medical procedure where communication and correct background information are essential. Here are my tips for donating blood in Japan:

- ❁ First, get to know the center you'll donate at. I'd recommend calling first and stating your intention to donate. Expect your first visit to take more time as you work out the details. Be patient. My blood center had never had an English-speaking donor the first time I went. Now, they're overjoyed every time I call to make an appointment.
- ❁ Have at least conversational Japanese ability and a dictionary or translation app at hand. It's important for you to understand what's going on, especially if you've never donated blood before. If you speak little or no Japanese, bring a friend who can!
- ❁ Take a look at the translated forms and links provided in the "Resources" box on this page. Understand well the requirements and procedures for donating in Japan.
- ❁ Some of the people who are excluded from donating in Japan are: those who have been in Japan less than 4 weeks (including brief trips out of the country), those who have had new piercings or tattoos in the past year, those taking prescription drugs, and anyone who has spent more than 30 days in the UK before 2004. You can find links to a full list in the "Resources" section.



Donating at the center myself the day before after a prep meeting

Organizing a blood drive event

Once you get familiar with the donation process in Japan, you might want to host your own blood donation event. Here are the steps I'd recommend:

- ❁ Discuss the idea with the chosen center well in advance. It goes without saying that 10 English-speaking foreigners in the center is a different ballgame to just 1.
- ❁ Recruit the help of a few people who will not be donating and have good Japanese skills. You'll need a few people running around checking on things and facilitating communication.
- ❁ Once you've gotten the word out and people are signing up, give them all of the documents, questionnaires, and forms ahead of time. This will save you loads of time on the day and make sure that people who aren't eligible don't show up just to get turned away.
- ❁ On the day of, bring printouts of all the necessary forms and information to help with translating. Forms must be filled out in Japanese, but having English on hand makes it a breeze to go through.
- ❁ Make sure to get food into the donors! Iron and energy levels are really important to the donation process. It's also nice to meet up and get excited beforehand. Remember: no alcohol or tobacco before and for a few hours after donation, as they dangerously thin your blood!
- ❁ Give people ample time to rest after donating, at least 30 minutes, before driving or cycling. Depending on how many people show up, it could take several hours for everyone to finish!
- ❁ Know who's donating for the very first time ever, and be prepared to answer questions and support these people!
- ❁ Let the staff know of any problems, ill feelings, or worries. They're there to help and make sure everyone's safe.

Resource Links

- Online folder of my translated documents. These have been approved as accurate by the Fukushima Red Cross, but are not official documents.
- Full list of requirements and exclusions for donation.
- A great blog post with videos about donating in Japan.
- General information on Japan's blood programs.

HOKKAIDO ENGLISH CHALLENGE

HEC Campers gather together to write English letters to their friends

Scott Kominkiewicz, Hokkaido

"HEC is kind of like a heaven for me." That's how one of our past students, Wanaka, explains her experience with the Hokkaido English Challenge or, as we Hokkaido-jin like to call it, HEC. For the past seven months, I have had the honor of coordinating this heavenly program. And boy, what a rewarding seven months those have been so far.

HEC puts together a test in March that Hokkaido ALTs will ask their first-year junior high and first-year high school students to participate in. For a month or two, the students and ALT will practice together for this test. This practice provides a unique opportunity for the ALTs and students to interact and learn English. This test differs from the tests students are used to taking at school. For starters, all answers require a verbal response from the student. The test basically gauges the students' ability to speak English naturally and use an expansive vocabulary. The tests prompts these abilities from the students by asking the student to describe a picture, listen to a narrative and answer questions about it, play the popular game, "Twenty Questions", and other tasks.

You may ask, "Why would students want to take this test?" Students who score high enough are invited to come to the annual HEC English Camp at no cost (other than the cost of transportation to and from camp). HEC camp is accredited by the Hokkaido's Governor's office and run solely by Hokkaido ALTs, which provides students with immersion in a conversational English environment. In this environment, students engage in fun activities, such as Crazy Olympics, campfire songs, and theatre performances (written and performed in English) that not only improve their ability, but also boost their confidence in English. Another way HEC Camp helps facilitate English language acquisition is having a letter writing and delivery system. Students can voluntarily write letters (in English of course) to their friends and camp volunteers at any time during camp. Last year, our students wrote hundreds of letters, with nearly 500 on the last night alone.

What I believe separates HEC Camp from similar camps is the unique atmosphere HEC Camp provides. One of our past students described HEC Camp to "living in a foreign country for five days". The diversity among our HEC Volunteer staff, camp exposes students to a variety of cultures they may not be familiar with. HEC Camp also centralizes its food menu around

cuisines that most of the students are not used to. The students experience these "new" foods such as tacos, pho noodles, Indian curry, grilled cheese, and cereal. Yes cereal; last year I saw a kid who encountered the stuff for the first time at camp and thought it best to pile a bit of cereal on his plate next to his scrambled eggs and garnish both with a bit of milk. YUM! But yes, overall our students really seem to enjoy these "new" things that resemble visiting a foreign country.

Speaking of foreign countries, in addition to hosting summer camp, HEC also awards the top scoring junior high student with a study abroad experience to an English-speaking country or region. With assistance from HEC, the student works with a travel agency in regards to staying with an overseas family, planning fun trips, and taking part in an overseas language school. HEC assumes responsibility for the round-trip airfare, travel insurance, room and board, tuition, and consultation fees (approx. 400,000 JPY). These trips generally last about 2 weeks. The HEC 2013 winner decided to go to San Diego, California in January of this year. She had a wonderful time and we are waiting to hear her stories. Other students have gone on trips to New York, London, New Zealand, and Canada.

Other students with high scores are able to earn English-related prizes, including CDs of their favorite English-speaking artists, iPods, electronic dictionaries, and books.

HEC relies solely on an all-volunteer staff made up of ALTs all throughout Hokkaido. Let me first introduce you to our HEC committee, or as I like to call it, Team HEC. At the top, there's me, the HEC Coordinator, who makes sure the test and all its components are in order, handles the annual budget, negotiates the homestay, and recruits volunteers. In terms of HEC Camp, the Camp Coordinator, Milly, takes care of organizing and recruiting volunteers for camp. She is joined by the Camp Co-Coordinator, Caroline, who helps her carry out those duties. Then there's the Events Chair, Emily. Emily helps carry out the logistics of each fundraiser event HEC conducts throughout the year. Our translators, Debbie and Vivian, probably have the most misleading job-titles on the planet. Yes, they translate, but they are also an instrumental part in the negotiating deals with vendors for HEC Camp.

HEC also relies on many other volunteers throughout Hokkaido to carry out functions necessary to the program. First off, Team

HEC has been blessed with a very supportive AJET chapter, HAJET. When we need their help, the HAJET Council has been very effective at providing whatever resources they can to help. HEC also gets a lot of help from our four HEC test writers who put in many hours writing the test and the 16 judges who score the student submissions. HEC Camp also needs around 20-35 volunteers to complete a wide variety of tasks such as cooking daily meals, organizing games, putting on plays, and much more. Last, but certainly not least, HEC relies on the dedicated ALTs who register their students in this test and help them prepare for it. All in all, HEC relies on volunteers who are willing to help HEC on top of their full time jobs to make sure that the tests and camp are successful year after year.

In terms of funding, HEC relies completely on donations and registration fees. HEC collects 3,000 JPY from each participant. However, even the total amount of these fees is a fraction of what HEC needs in order to provide all of the prizes that come along with the program. Thus, HEC relies mostly on donations and Team HEC seldom rests when it comes to planning fundraising events. Our various events include, bake sales, costume contests, running/biking challenges, raffles, enkais, and T-shirt sales. Team HEC has been very fortunate to have many generous donors who have contributed a total over 660,000 JPY at our events thus far since August. Team HEC is also very grateful for the recent involvement of the HAJET Council taking a more active role in helping us with these events. For the future, we are hoping to attract sponsorships from companies, big and small.

This year HEC will enter its 20th year benefitting students throughout Hokkaido. Throughout those years, HEC has definitely seen more than its fair share of setbacks. One of the more notable setbacks was the infamous bear sighting in 2011 a week before camp that led to the campground deciding to close and consequently, the cancellation of camp that year. If you are curious, we are planning to have HEC Camp at that very same site for the first since that bear sighting. Hopefully that bear and her family decide to leave us alone this year.

Luckily bear sightings don't happen that often, but recognition and lack of funding pose serious problems for HEC almost every year. Despite being around for 20 years, many schools are still not aware of what HEC is, and there is always at least one Kyoto-sensei who is apprehensive of letting his or her students go in fear that HEC is too good to be true. My team and I have discussed this issue and have come up with a set of solutions to pass on to the next HEC Committee.

It should be no surprise that an organization that offers so much and relies almost solely on donations will have monetary problems from time to time. Unfortunately, last year's HEC Committee spent over 300,000 JPY more than it had raised. We have been very fortunate this year to receive many generous donations to make up for last year's loss and fund this year's camp and homestay prize. Up to about 5 years ago, HEC used to offer a homestay prize for the top junior high and the top senior high scorers. However, HEC had to cancel the senior high homestay due to a lack of funding.

But this year we have a very positive outlook at HEC. We have been on a roll and want to keep that momentum going for the benefit of the 2015 HEC senior high winner by offering him/her a homestay prize along with the junior high winner. In order to



One of the six groups takes a photo in front of the lake during the English scavenger hunt

make this happen, Team HEC would need to raise just another 300,000 JPY by July 26th. We need all the help we can get to make this happen!

That being said, if you are planning on making the trip to Hokkaido anytime soon, please be on the lookout for our events. They not only give you a fun opportunity to meet Hokkaido (and maybe other) JETs, but also benefit this truly awesome cause. For more information on our events, please email our Events Chair, Emily at hec.events@hajet.org. If you would like to volunteer at our annual camp from July 26th-30th, we would love for you to apply. Please email our Camp Coordinator, Milly, at heccamp@hajet.org

If you cannot attend our events, but still want to make a contribution, we have a Japan Post bank account you can transfer money to free of charge if you have a Japan Post account too. Our bank transfer details are as follows:

From JP Post Accounts

HEC account number: 19040-12690631

記号 19040

番号 12690631

HEC account name: ホッカイドウイングリッシュチャレンジ

From Other Accounts

Bank: ゆうちょ銀行 (Post Office Bank)

Account Number (口座番号): 1269063

Branch Number (店番): 908

Branch Name (店名): 九〇八(キュウゼロハチ)

Account Type: 普通預金

If you send us a donation of 500 JPY or more, I will have one of our students write a small thank you note for your generous donation—just provide me with a mailing address at hec@hajet.org or in the furikomi "notes" section. Every yen matters!

Scott Kominkiewicz is a 24 year-old on his second year in the JET Programme and the 2014 Hokkaido English Challenge Coordinator. He lives in Kitami City, Hokkaido. Scott teaches junior high and elementary schools. Originally, he is from New Jersey, USA. In 2012, Scott graduated from Lafayette College in Pennsylvania majoring in Anthropology, Sociology, and History. His hobbies include running marathons (full and half), and karaoke. In August, he will return to the United States with his loving fiancé, Ayako, to pursue his dreams of becoming a lawyer.

EVENTS

CROSS
CONNECT

EDITORIAL Staying On—JETs in Fukushima

The following is an excerpt from "Staying On—JETs in Fukushima Share Their Stories" by Eden Law (Fukushima 2010-11). Some content has been removed to fit the editorial space. Readers are strongly suggested to **read the full article**.

When Iwaki's board of education announced April 11th as the official date of the re-commencement of work, most of the city's ALTs came back from wherever they had been—it should be noted that ALTs were given a choice, with no penalty, of forfeiting their contract. For many, the decision to return was not, by any means, popular. As Lisa, a 4th-year ALT, puts it, "I had neighbours coming to my door with printouts about the dangers of radiation and news about the nuclear reactor in Fukushima. I had arguments with friends and family members. They couldn't understand why I wanted to go back to Japan—back to Fukushima—after what had happened."

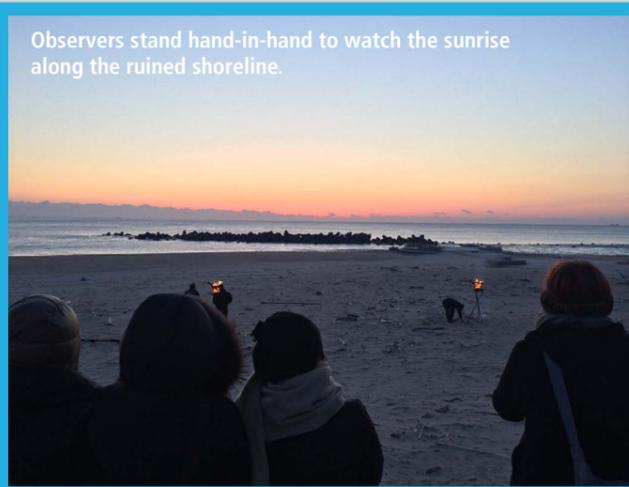
For many, the first few weeks at school were mostly cleanup duty. "There was always something to clean up—we continued to have minor, and sometimes not so minor, aftershocks and earthquakes," Xan continues. "And it would always create a mess each time. Cabinets would fall over, glass would break, and we would have to clean up all over again." The first day of the students' return to school was a happy occasion. "It was amazing—there were a lot of happy reunions. I even had one female student come right out and tell me she loved me!" laughed Xan. "Coming back to school was something the students really needed—it meant that some sort of normal routine was back."

When asked about the schoolchildren and how they were affected, Lisa says, "Lunchtime was difficult.... The elementary school students were getting hot, delicious-smelling school lunches prepared by one of the few remaining lunch centres. The junior high school students were getting pre-packaged meals that sometimes barely seemed edible. The kids weren't happy, and it showed in their lack of smiles. It was as if everyone had a dark raincloud hanging over their heads. There was no laughter, tempers were short, and kids would fight."

On the three year anniversary of that day, nearly 1,000 people got together on a strand of beach in Iwaki to commemorate and



Taiko drummers greet the dawn at the "Don't Forget Fukushima" event on the morning of March 8th. Photo by Xan Wetherall.



Observers stand hand-in-hand to watch the sunrise along the ruined shoreline.

remember. A taiko group from the evacuated and now empty town of Futaba played in the dark hours of the early morning, and as the sun came up over the sea, it lit up the remains of buildings that had once stood on the coast. People prayed silently, some sang, some cried, but in the light of a beautiful sunrise, it was easier to feel hopeful about the future.

Lisa reflects, "It's been three years since the earthquake, and the atmospheres at these schools have improved a lot. The students are much happier now, smiling and laughing often and talking about the future. It's very good to see!...I have about a year and a half left in Iwaki, and just as my students are preparing for their futures, I am also preparing for mine. Taking what I have learned from living and teaching in Japan, I plan to go to grad school and continue to improve my Japanese and become a translator...I hope to come back to Japan many more times and see for myself just how amazing Tohoku will become in the future!"

Eden Law is a member of JETAA NSW in Sydney, Australia, continuing his connection with the JET Programme and the Japanese community in Sydney. Other than that, he is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, served with a side of salad and sprinkled with croutons.

THIS MONTH IN EVENTS...

This month's Events section opens with a CrossConnect feature from an article published in JQ Magazine and on jetwit.com. Eden Law lived in Iwaki-shi, Fukushima, when the Great Tohoku Earthquake struck. This year, just shy of the March 11 anniversary, he interviewed fellow Iwaki JETs and teachers about their experiences during and after the devastation. The article is a must-read, and he has graciously allowed excerpts to be printed here.

However, choosing the excerpts from Law's article was not easy. April 11, 2011, is when the Iwaki-shi Board of Education declared the "official re-commencement of work," and when most JETs who chose to stay returned to work. This timeframe is the excerpts' temporal focus. After all, mending and revival, while piecemeal, are processes that have been crucial to the endurance of affected families and communities. They are events that should and will be explored for many years to come.

Saitama ALT Chris Low brings readers back to the lighter side of things with his humorous explanation of what it's like to be a family on JET, and offers tips to event planners who seek to include them. In the Spotlight, Fukuoka's Natalie Liverant gives some love to JETs who volunteered with the recent TEDx event and tells us about the TEDx experience. This month's section



wraps up with the stack of blocks that is the Events Calendar. Check it out and go somewhere!

Only one more issue left until autumn! Is there something special you want to see in the Events pages? Please tell us: connect.events@ajet.net.

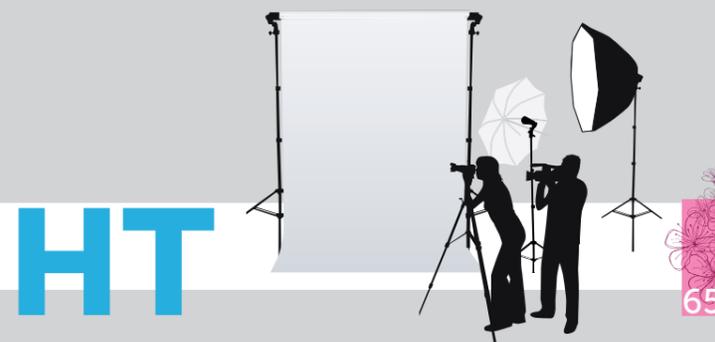
SPOTLIGHT

TEDxFukuoka JET volunteers: Natalie Liverant, Fukuoka

Have you met TED? Most of us who know TED might say TED is short, fun, and inspiring. TED has Ideas Worth Spreading.

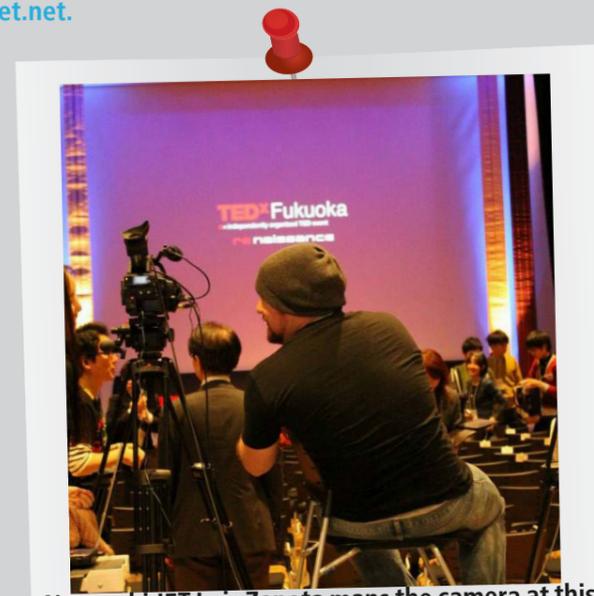
TEDxFukuoka finished its second major event on February 22, 2014. This year's team included JETs from Saga and Nagasaki, as well as Fukuoka JETs. Having also participated in the first event last year, I can honestly say that the people who put the event together are an exceptional team of Japanese, English, bilingual, and multilingual people who serve the small-but-growing TED community in many ways. If you want to participate on the Fukuoka team and your Japanese skills aren't the strongest, don't worry: the translation team is still for you. There are plenty of documents that will need copy editing, or at least a glance-over by an advanced English speaker. On the day of the event, our translation team morphed into a variety of jobs: photographer, videographer, social networkers, hospitality volunteers, and even an emcee!

If you ask the non-native Japanese speakers of the group, I am sure many will say they wish they could have done more. Many things are organized among the native or advanced Japanese speakers, but I genuinely feel the TED community is working harder each year to acknowledge all volunteers' abilities and include every member in the making and operations of the event. I have high hopes for next year. If you have the time and the interest, consider participating in a TEDx event near you.



Natalie Liverant is a 3rd year ALT living in Chikugo, Fukuoka. She loves hiking, judo, and creating new recipes.

Do you know think the Spotlight should shine on someone special? Is your local AJET chapter involved in a unique event? Send us an email at connect.events@ajet.net.



Nagasaki JET Luis Zapata mans the camera at this year's TEDx Fukuoka. Photo by Laurel Williams

WHAT ABOUT JEFs?



Yokohama at the Anpanman Museum, home to the only cartoon with more than 1,300 different characters! We added one: Kylapanman.

Chris Low, Saitama

I will lovingly refer to those non-child-possessing counterparts as... TUD (Japan Exchange [T] eacher [U]nequipped with [D]ependents). I am terrible at acronyms. Hi, TUD.

TUD Talk: TUD, you rock! You know other people on the JET Program probably rock! And you want to meet them! What better way than to plan a get-together, right? An event is always an acutely good idea. Hanabi season? Friends and beer are (poorly) scientifically proven to effectively deter dehydration! Cherry blossoms are blooming, and the weather is awesome? Perfect time for... rooftop beer garden! All JETs have a natural, profound need to get to know each other, laugh, possibly take an embarrassing selfie, and become generally that much closer to becoming lifelong friends—doomed to occasionally be separaTUD

by irksome national borders. Facebook invites fly, and witty follow-up confirmations follow. A few months go by, events have continued, and friendships continue to grow. Life has, in essence, become fairly magical for you, and you are living it to the hilt, as you should be.

But... why doesn't "that JET with a kid" ever attend events? Anti-social jerk who hates life and all forms of fun? And nomihoudai? Couldn't be. Few people hate beer enough to pass on nomihoudai. JEFs and their families want to get to know other JETs. We wish we could attend all the events and frolic with the other woodland creatures that inhabit Japan's urban and suburban sprawls.

But, great hunter, we are timid creatures, easily frightened by loud noises and potential threats to our young. So, in typical herd fashion, we stay close to them, keeping them in dark, warm places, out of view of potential predators. Still, we can be lured out of our dens. Let's go deep into the wild and explore the ecology of the JEF. (Cue safari sounds.)

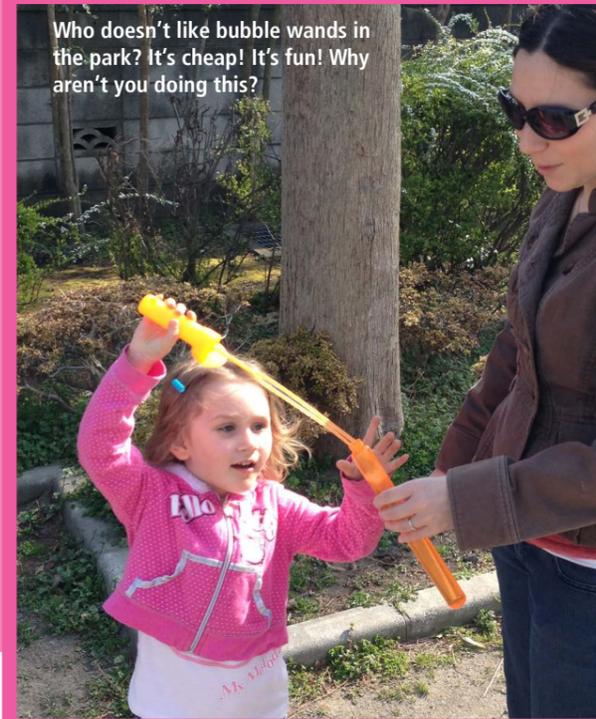
Ice-skating in Kawagoe—or anywhere else—can make cool, grassroots internationalization opportunities.



I've been asked on occasion about what JETs who have families (JEFs) would like to see from event planners. Arguably, JEFs are even scarcer than 5th-year JETs. Think: rainbow-zebra-unicorn. With laser hooves—I want laser hooves. Yet, as internationalism and global exchange become more attractive to society, more families are seeing work abroad as a good way to create peace on Earth, goodwill towards men, and bilingual/bi-cultural children. However, planning an event that is family-friendly is quite different from events that are typically geared toward single, young, snappy, and good-looking JETs like you. (You: "Why thank you, Mr. Kind Author, that's flattering! Me: "Oh, not at all, you're welcome, Good Reader!")

So, what would a JEF want out of an event? The immortal question of "Why are we here?" takes on a different meaning when you're name is JEF. The answers are varied, of course, and the details change. Still, two things are pretty standard among JEFs: 1) We wanTUD to do the right thing for our kids by coming to work for the JET Program, and 2) We're relatively like our non-child-possessing counterparts.

Who doesn't like bubble wands in the park? It's cheap! It's fun! Why aren't you doing this?



JEFs often feel they have many priorities to manage in their new surroundings and as a result, may suffer from feelings of inadequacy regarding meeting the needs of our young. JEFs may also be trying to maintain previous dwellings or manage large sums of school or travel-related debt. Additionally, there are often mundane needs:

- ◆ lack of available resources or materials (money and laundry)
- ◆ hunter-gathering duties (grocery shopping)
- ◆ child-rearing and early survival skills (bilingual training and elementary school preparation)
- ◆ familial bonding rituals (video games and down-time)

And JEFs occasionally need to catch up on sleep—though this is seemingly never a priority. Additionally, we are likewise very dedicated to our jobs and have the privileged challenge of proving that JEFs can succeed in and contribute to the JET Program's goals. So while JEFs definitely have a keen interest in exploring events, it can be difficult to entice them to deviate from any routines or habits. Here are three guidelines that may help you approach the JEF:

1) Invite often

As parents, JEFs are often, in contemporary technical terminology, "complete basket cases." JEFs sometimes suffer feelings of anxiety, frantic uncertainty, or forgetfulness because of a variety of reasons. Therefore, JEFs may question their capability to participate, perceive their attendance as awkward despite assurances to the contrary, and generally doubt their ability to fit in. However, alleviating this fear is relatively simple: invite us, and remind us often. In doing so, you provide positive motivation for us to join your event and reassure us that JEFs are not pariahs to be feared and examined from a far. Furthermore, making it clear that opting out is perfectly acceptable will demonstrate that you understand our challenges.

2) Offer "food"

More specifically, offer an environment conducive to our participation. JEFs who are parents want just one thing: to know their child is safe. In a strange land, JEFs feel like that are the only ones who are able to guarantee that. Their silly, completely-irrational-but-very-real fear is that the event will turn into a drunken revelry that rivals the JEF's college years. While JEFs want to participate in that (trust me, JEFs miss that), they do not want their child to be negatively influenced or harmed by an accident. As such, it's hard for us to look forward to that potentiality and leaves us feeling negligent while attempting to make merry during such occasions.





Why not get festive with the family during Hanami?

Now you have attractUD your prey. "I've got it! I've got it! What do I do with it?" Some suggestions for keeping your quarry present:

1) Have an alcohol-free event

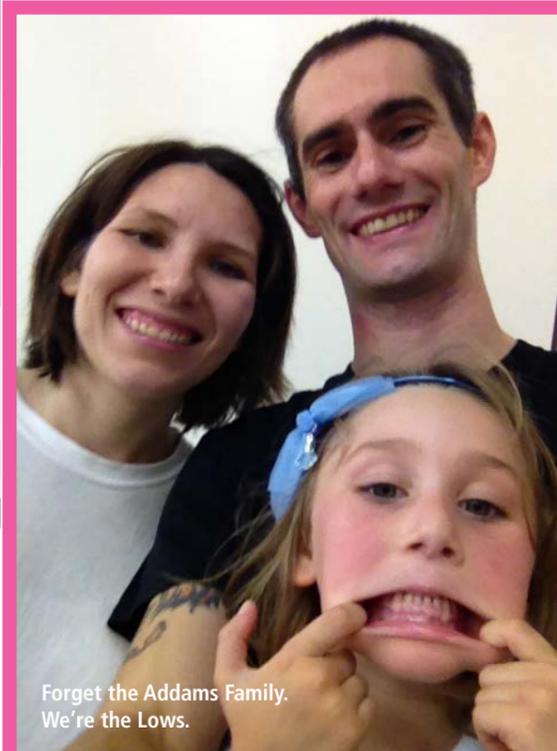
Chotto muri? I understand; it's Japan. Let's compromise: have a two-hour window that is alcohol-free and kid-friendly. Plan a few games, bring bubbles, or just play tag for a while. Give our child some time to talk to you and learn about where you all came from. The JEFs will enjoy learning about you, you may enjoy learning about them, and it would really help us learn if you are someone they can trust to invite to the den to devour our latest kill. I mean, have dinner.

2) Forget alcohol-free—JEF's like alcohol too!

But my kid comes first to me. Offer a DesignaTUD Babysitter, someone who will be watchful and sober for a couple hours so my wife and I can have a drink or two, get to know you, and relax. Then, we can take off. JEF's aren't that interested in all-nighters because hangovers are a grim affair at 6 AM watching "Happy, Clappy!" the next day. Offer us a DesBab and we'll feel a lot better about the moral quandary of responsibly attending. Or, shameless plug: simply offer to babysit for us sometime. We love to get out sans our little doll—event or not! My wife and I pay 1,000 yen per hour and will have pizza delivered. It's not a bad gig!

3) Give a nod to our budget limitations

We're not complaining, just being mindful of what we can and can't afford. If the tabehoudai is only 2,500 yen a piece, it's still 7,500 yen for our family plus train-fare, and that's a reality for us. We have to look at that money as a potential source for the ongoing battle of keeping our child in clothes as she grows—as she apparently secretes growth serum—and feeding the small army that lives in her mouth. If you think Eric Carle was exaggerating when he said the caterpillar ate "one piece of chocolate cake, one ice-cream cone, one pickle, one slice of Swiss cheese, one slice of salami, one lollipop, one piece of cherry pie, one sausage, one cupcake,



Forget the Addams Family. We're the Lows.



Bonus points when you go to Tokyo Disneyland with a blonde little girl. In an Alice dress. And she happily cosplays Alice for other visitors' photos.



Shotokan Karate at the Warabi Rec Center. What better family therapy is there!?

and one slice of watermelon" ¹ ...you have not met my kid.

Sources:

¹ Carle, Eric. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. New York: Harper's Inc., 1980.

4) Plan a different kind of event

There are lots of really inexpensive, fun places to go that could tap into a JET's inner-child: a museum outing, zoo trip, cultural heritage site visit, or **collective storming of Kodomo no Shiro!** Talk about bringing internationalism to a bunch of random children and their families! Can you imagine the look of surprise?

Or.... A NERF or squirt gun war in the park! (Insert subliminal messaging here. Shoot. NERF guns. DO IT!)

5) If we're all in the mood to spend some money and you're in the area, let's do Disneyland!

Night passes are only 3,000 yen. As parents, we love spending money when we know it will be worthwhile. A few hours at Disney with our kid is divine anytime—except in February. We try to go for an evening every three or four months. If you're not around Disneyland, there are lots of other child-oriented amusement parks in Japan that you and your local JEF can try. Enjoy being a kid again with a JEF for a little while.

Let our youngling's bedazzled smiles put a special glow in your heart, too. That's what she does for us, and we're confident hanging around children can do that for you, too, any time of the year.

Rest assured, the elusive Laser-Hooved Rainbow-Zebracorn's curiosity is insatiable, and its drive to experience new people is strong, which is why it has journeyed to this strange new land. Your quarry will come if you pursue it and follow this field guide. And if not, we love chatting and keeping in contact via telepathy (or Facebook).

Chris Low is a teacher-dad interested in everything about everything, how to teach it to others, and how to get others interested in the same. He loves writing horrible children's songs, such as "While I Learn to Play Guitar, I'll Drive Your Mommy Nuts," adventuring, and talking with anyone at length about philosophy, life, and other stuff. He lives with his loving and unbelievably patient wife and daughter in Saitama City.

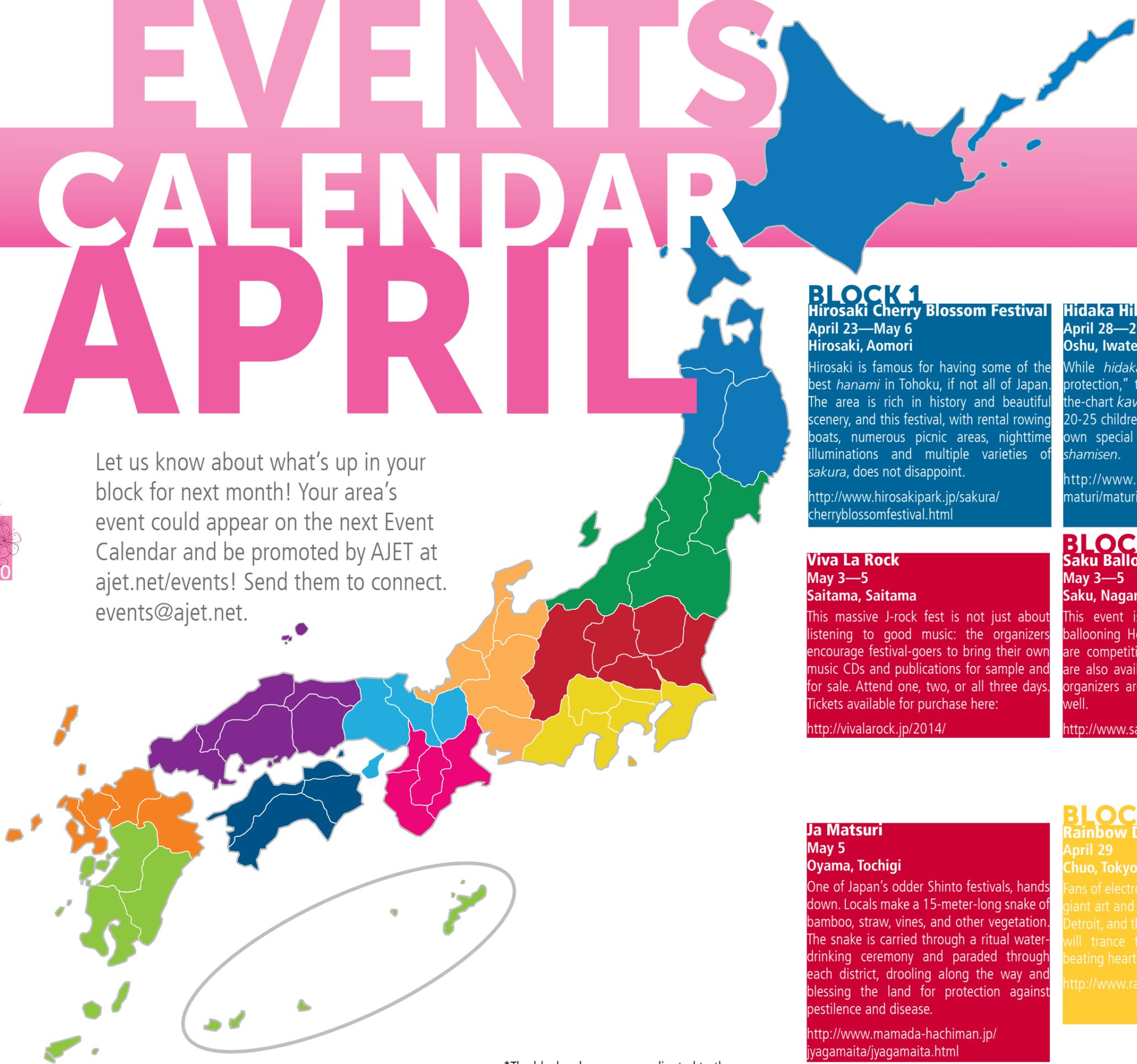
If you're a JEF, what events does your family enjoy? Do you have any advice for the JET community or any future JEFs? Send us your thoughts at connect.events@ajet.net.



EVENTS CALENDAR APRIL



Let us know about what's up in your block for next month! Your area's event could appear on the next Event Calendar and be promoted by AJET at ajet.net/events! Send them to connect.events@ajet.net.



BLOCK 1

Hirosaki Cherry Blossom Festival
April 23—May 6
Hirosaki, Aomori

Hirosaki is famous for having some of the best *hanami* in Tohoku, if not all of Japan. The area is rich in history and beautiful scenery, and this festival, with rental rowing boats, numerous picnic areas, nighttime illuminations and multiple varieties of *sakura*, does not disappoint.

<http://www.hirosakipark.jp/sakura/cherryblossomfestival.html>

Hidaka Hibuse Matsuri
April 28—29
Oshu, Iwate

While *hidaka hibuse* translates to "fire protection," this fest is notable for its off-the-chart *kawaii* levels. Six floats each carry 20-25 children playing their neighborhood's own special tune on flutes, drums, and *shamisen*.

http://www.bunka.pref.iwate.jp/dentou/maturi/maturi/maturi_003.html

BLOCK 2

Yonezawa Uesugi Matsuri
April 29—May 3
Yonezawa, Yamagata

This matsuri marks the coming of spring to Yamagata and remembers the battles of Kawanakajima. Actors reenact the battles and perform in a samurai parade on the last day of the event.

<http://uesugi.yonezawa.info/>

Viva La Rock
May 3—5
Saitama, Saitama

This massive J-rock fest is not just about listening to good music: the organizers encourage festival-goers to bring their own music CDs and publications for sample and for sale. Attend one, two, or all three days. Tickets available for purchase here:

<http://vivalarock.jp/2014/>

BLOCK 3

Saku Balloon Festival 2014
May 3—5
Saku, Nagano

This event is the second round of the ballooning Honda Grand Prix. While there are competitive elements, hot-air balloons are also available for public rides, and the organizers are holding a photo contest as well.

<http://www.saku-balloon.jp/>

Bunsui Sakura Matsuri Oiran Dochu
April 20
Tsubame, Niigata

Colloquially called the Courtesans' Parade, this event keeps alive the *oiran-dochu*—the stroll courtesans made escorting their guests around the quarter. Women all over Japan vie to walk in this event dressed as one of the three *oiran*. The parade is known as one of the most popular and photogenic in the country.

<http://www.tsubame-kankou.jp/event/oiran/about.html>

Ja Matsuri
May 5
Oyama, Tochigi

One of Japan's odder Shinto festivals, hands down. Locals make a 15-meter-long snake of bamboo, straw, vines, and other vegetation. The snake is carried through a ritual water-drinking ceremony and paraded through each district, drooling along the way and blessing the land for protection against pestilence and disease.

<http://www.mamada-hachiman.jp/jyagamaita/jyagamaita.html>

BLOCK 4

Rainbow Disco Club 2014
April 29
Chuo, Tokyo

Fans of electronica; get thee to Tokyo for this giant art and music event. DJs from Norway, Detroit, and the UK—among other places—will trance their way into your techno-beating hearts. Tickets on sale now.

<http://www.rainbowdiscoclub.com/tokyo/>

Meiji Shrine Spring Grand Festival
April 29—May 3
Yoyogi, Tokyo

Tokyo's preeminent Shinto shrine will hold some of its largest, most solemn ceremonies of the year in recognition of Emperor Showa's prayer for peace. The event is rich with performance arts, including *Bugaku* (ancient imperial court music); *Kagura*, *Hogaku* and *Hobu* (classical Japanese dances); *Noh* and *Kyogen* (classical Japanese theatre); *Sankyoku* (traditional Japanese music); and *Satsuma biwa* (the Japanese lute).

<http://www.meijijingu.or.jp/english/>

*The block colours are coordinated to the map.



Odakoage Matsuri
May 3—5
Hamamatsu, Shizuoka

There are fighting kite festivals all over Japan, but this is one of the largest and most rousing. Neighborhoods sponsor very large kites that need a team of 20 men to lift in the air. The night before the competition, festival-goers parade, drink, and play music in the streets.

<http://hamamatsu-daisuki.net/matsuri/>

BLOCK 5

Takayama Spring Matsuri
April 14—15
Takayama, Gifu

Considered to be one of Japan's most beautiful festivals. Twelve floats, some of them centuries old, are escorted through the streets of this picturesque city after a special Shinto ceremony. Many people dress in Edo-period costume, and lanterns adorn the floats at night.

<http://www.hida.jp/matsuri/>

Furukawa Matsuri
April 19—20
Hida, Gifu

This exhilarating festival has two parts: the Okoshi Daiko, wherein hundreds of men carry a giant drum through the town, and the Yatai parade, with nine adorned floats parading through Furukawa.

<http://www.hida-kankou.jp/kanko/foreign/en/things-to-do/festivals/>

BLOCK 8

Hana Haru Festa
April 18—20
Tokushima, Tokushima

One of Tokushima City's bigger festivals subsumes the central Shinmachi river park, hosting Awa Odori dances and other live performances, and exhibitions for ramen and local goods, among other events.

<http://ameblo.jp/hanaharu-f/>

23rd Lake Asagiri Marathon
May 3
Seiyo, Ehime

Participants take a jog around this beautiful lake, choosing either a half-marathon or a 10-km road race. Guest runners hold running clinics the day before.

<http://goo.gl/4geKL9>

Kotohira-gu Shugiku
May 5
Kotohira, Kagawa

Shinto priests at this shrine don formal robes and play *kemari*—an ancient team sport—and the first Japanese sport to become highly developed and standardized.

<http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e5451.html>

BLOCK 6

Western Japan ALT Soccer Tournament
April 19
Awaji, Hyogo

"Japan's Biggest Foreigner Football Tournament" is in its 12th year. Men's and women's teams compete for the championship, and spectators are welcome to come cheer on their friends. Contact Chris Moore at ALTsoccertournament@gmail.com for more info.

<https://sites.google.com/site/altsoccertournament/home2>

Shinkosai
April 20
Kyoto, Kyoto

This 1000-year-old matsuri in scenic Arashiyama is dedicated to the *kami* of sake-brewing. *Mikoshi* are ushered through a procession, and participants hold up masks of the god on tall sticks.

http://kyotojoho.co.jp/english/event/2014/4/index_other.html

Tonami Tulip Fair 2014
April 23—May 6
Tonami, Toyama

If you have *sakura* fatigue but still want to get some kind of flower viewing in, this fair features an astonishing show of tulip blooms. More than 2,500,000 tulips of 600 varieties lie in the landscape and are featured in different events and flower shows. Tickets are 1,000 yen for adults, 300 yen for elementary and junior high school students, and young children are free.

<http://www.tulipfair.or.jp/>

BLOCK 9

Renge-e-mai
April 21
Okinoshima, Shimane

Renge-e-mai dances commemorate the Buddhist monk Kobo Daishi, and Okinoshima is the only place outside the Japanese Imperial Court where the sacred dances are performed. The dance is an Important Intangible Cultural Property, and worth seeing if you are in Shimane.

<http://www.connect-shimane.com/oki-renge-e-mai/>

Hiroshima Flower Festival
May 3—5
Hiroshima, Hiroshima

Peace Memorial Park become host to mikoshi, jazz dancers and baton twirlers, beauty queens, performers of various arts, a small zoo, and more than a million festival-goers. This is one of Western Japan's largest and most lively festivals.

<http://www.hiroshima-ff.com/>

BLOCK 10

2nd Annual Fukuoka AJET Skills Auction and Luau
April 19
Fukuoka, Fukuoka

Join Fukuoka JETs for a night of camaraderie and purpose as they auction off their varied skills. All funds support a local 1st or 2nd year high school student on a two-week homestay to an English-speaking country of their choice! Visit the Facebook event page for more information:

<http://www.facebook.com/events/238292469664349>

Kinosaki Onsen Festival
April 23—24
Kinosaki, Hyogo

Pack your *yukata* and head to this picturesque onsen town on the banks of the Maruyama River near the Sea of Japan. The town annually reveres the death of Dochi Shonin, its founder, with a variety of events.

<http://www.kinosaki-spa.gr.jp/global/events/events.html>

Sanno Matsuri
April 12—14
Otsu, Shiga

This is one of Shiga's biggest festivals that begins in March but culminates in mid-April. There is no shortage of *mikoshi*, but this matsuri uses them in a myriad of ways, from shaking them to mimic the birth of a deity to putting them on a boat and floating them to another shrine.

<http://hiyoshitaisha.jp/event/sannou/>

2014 Nagano Sake Messe
April 14
Osaka, Osaka

This is one of the biggest sake events in the Kansai area, welcoming 60 Nagano breweries and more than 500 sake varieties available for tasting. Advance tickets are 2,000 yen, and same-day tickets are 2,500 yen.

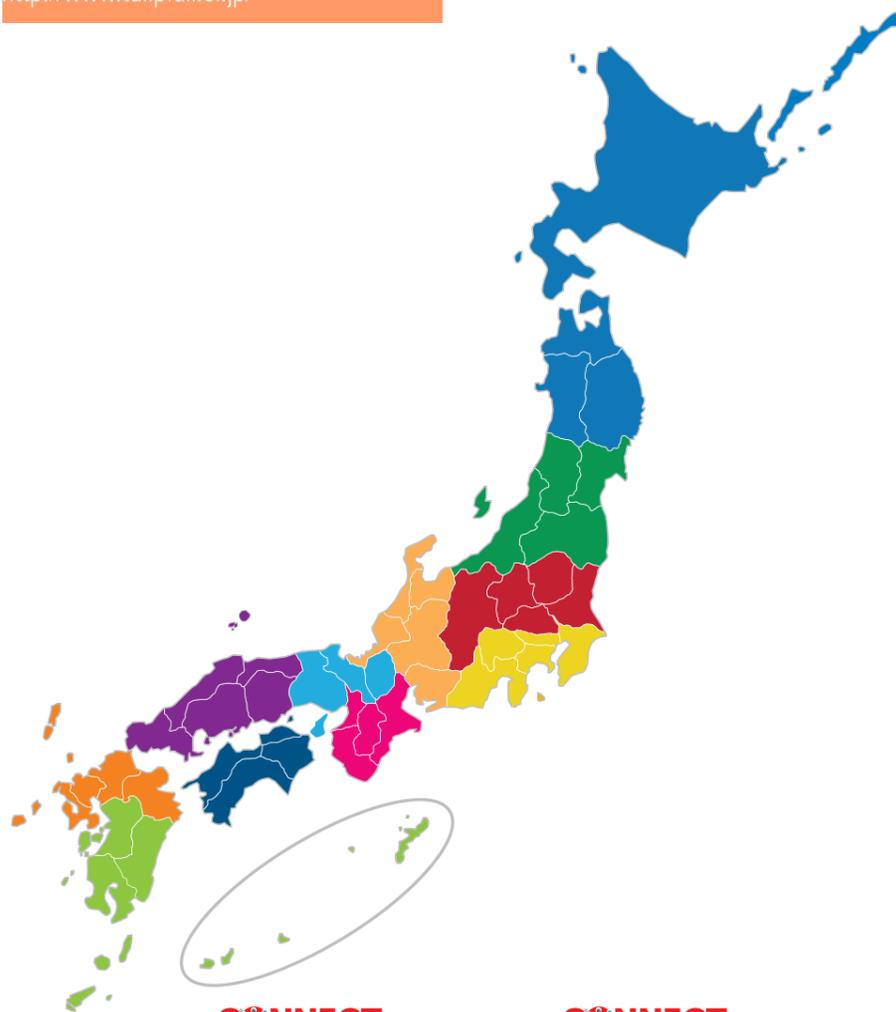
<http://www.nagano-sake.or.jp/topics/>

BLOCK 7

Cinco de Mayo Festival 2014
May 5—6
Osaka, Osaka

While traditionally a Mexican holiday, in Japan this festival has come to be a celebration of all the American cultures, from Canada to Argentina. Enjoy dances and music from the New World at this free event, and if you're lucky you may get a *tostada* or two!

<http://www.cincomayo.jp/>



BLOCK 11

Ryukyu Kaiensai
April 12
Ginowan, Okinawa

One of Japan's first and finest fireworks shows is on the shores of Ginowan Seaside Park, an hour-long display of 10,000 blooms set to traditional Okinawan music. This year's tickets are now on sale at the event website.

<http://www.ryukyu-kaiensai.com/>

Ushibuka Haiya Matsuri
April 19—21
Amakusa, Kumamoto

This dance festival is one of Kyushu's liveliest—combining dance elements that have arrived by boat from festivals all over Japan. All citizens participate, culminating in the 5,000-strong Haiya dance.

<http://www.goldenjipangu.com/140419ushibuka.html>

Okinohata Suitengu Festival
May 3—5
Yanagawa, Fukuoka

This small but unique festival centers on a *sanjinmaru*, a boat with a stage that floats near the Okinohata Suitengu Shrine. After sunset, special local traditional music is played live from the boat, filling the air as it moves through town.

<http://www.crossroadfukuoka.jp/en/event/?mode=detail&id=4000000001364>



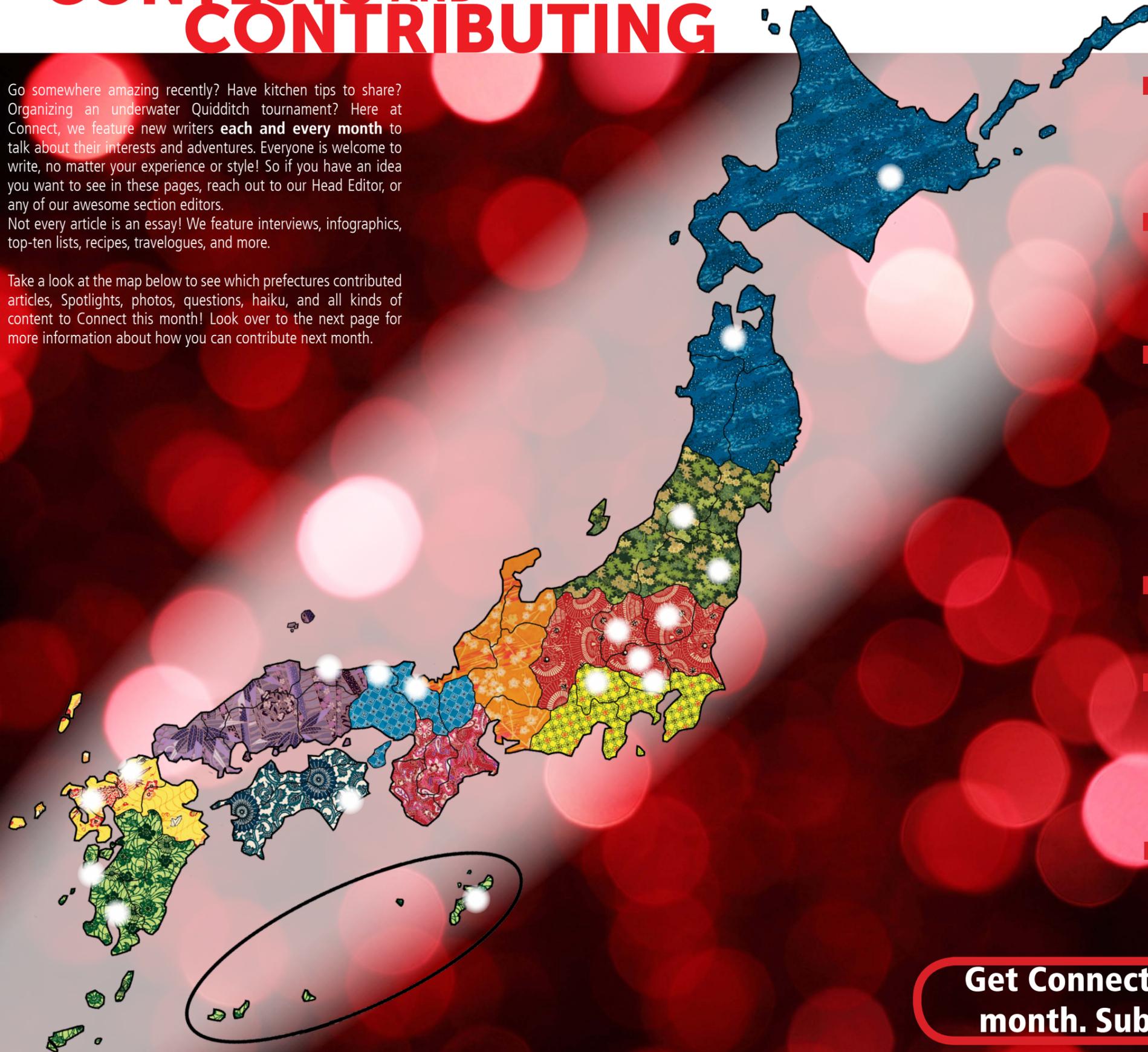
CONNECT

CONTESTS AND CONTRIBUTING

Go somewhere amazing recently? Have kitchen tips to share? Organizing an underwater Quidditch tournament? Here at Connect, we feature new writers **each and every month** to talk about their interests and adventures. Everyone is welcome to write, no matter your experience or style! So 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.

Not every article is an essay! We feature interviews, infographics, top-ten lists, recipes, travelogues, and more.

Take a look at the map below to see which prefectures contributed articles, Spotlights, photos, questions, haiku, and all kinds of content to Connect this month! Look over to the next page for more information about how you can contribute next month.



SPOTLIGHT

Every month, we highlight a handful of our readers who are doing something interesting or praiseworthy, nominated by their community. From fashionistas to volunteering superheroes to master chefs, we want to talk about them and what they do! Can't pick just one person to Spotlight? Tell us about a group, a town, or an event! As long as our incredible readers are involved, we want to share it!

ASK/CONNECT

Make your voice heard! Do you have a question about workplace etiquette? Did you go to an event we highlighted? Want to comment on last month's articles or editorials? Just feeling the overwhelming need to tell our editors how much you love and appreciate them? Each month we'll print your questions, comments, and witty observations so you can get Connected with us!

COVER PHOTO CONTEST

Get the perfect shot of the perfect moment here in Japan? Your photo could be next month's cover of Connect magazine! Every month we'll collect your photos select our favorite for the cover! Email all photo submissions with your **name and prefecture** to contest@ajet.net.

Photos should be a minimum of 1280 x 720 resolution, portrait-oriented, and belong to you. If they identifiably feature other people, you should have their permission to print the photo. Submit as many photos as you like! If your photo isn't featured, feel free to submit it again next month! Photos are used with permission, and all rights are retained by their owners.

HAIKU CONTEST

Each month Connect will feature haiku from our readers. Haiku are 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 contest@ajet.net.

COMICS

Easily our most-requested feature from last year, Connect now features comics and other art from the community. Comics should be relevant to life in Japan, and may not contain offensive material. Please email all submissions to connect.editor@ajet.net along with your name, prefecture, and 1-2 sentences about yourself or your work. Single-panel or multi-panel comics are totally fine, just ensure that they are legible and do not contain tons of tiny text. For a good example of size and content, check out our featured comic, "Life After the BOE" by David Namisato.

CONNECT CONTRIBUTORS GROUP

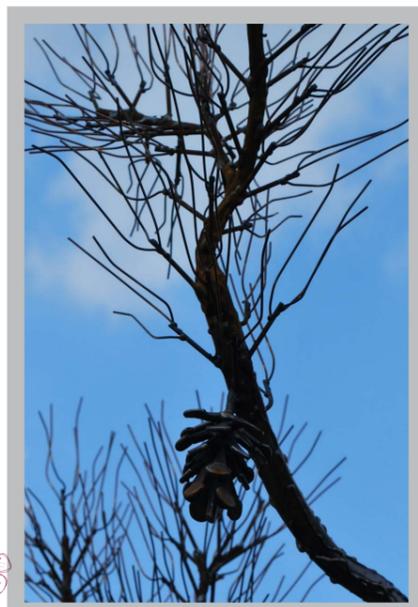
Interested in contributing to Connect? Want to stay up-to-date on interview opportunities, feature requests, and Connect announcements? Join the **Connect Contributors Circle** [] online to receive updates from us, pitch your ideas, and discuss with the Connect staff and community.

Get Connect magazine and AJET news every month. Subscribe to eConnect News here!

CONNECT HAIKU AND PHOTO CONTESTS

Our cover photo and haikus are all provided by current and former JETs from around the world. You can submit your entries any time to contest@ajet.net. One photo will be selected for the cover of Connect magazine! **All** photos and haikus received will be featured here each month, so give them all a little love!

You've already seen Sophie Patterson's winning photo this month. Here are all the fantastic submissions we received!



"Pine cone" Catrina Caira, Hokkaido



Graduation 2" Catrina Caira, Hokkaido



"Untitled" Jess Bertubin, Okianwa



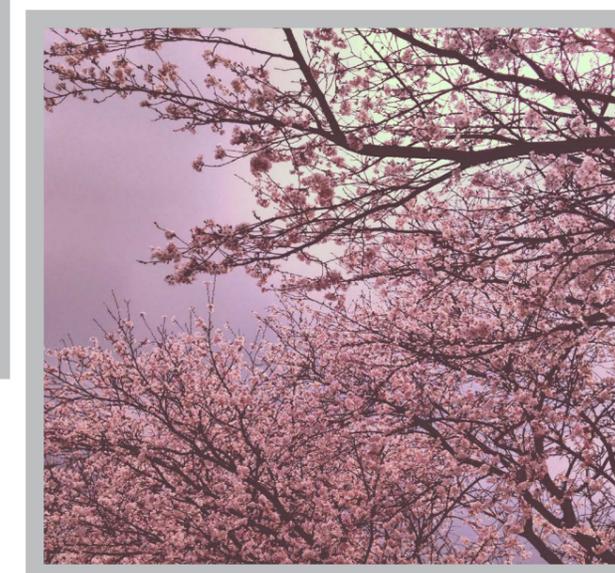
"Shochu Ingredients" Adam Carter, Kagoshima



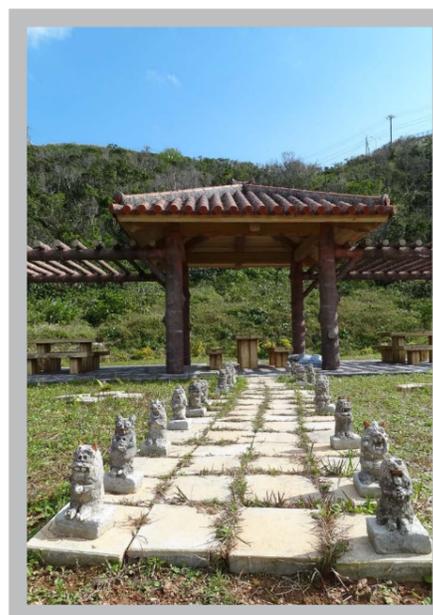
"Streaks of Sakura" Scott Kawaguchi, Oita



"Cape Sata Sunrise" Adam Carter, Kagoshima



"Untitled" Sophie Patterson, Miyazaki



"Untitled" Jess Bertubin, Okinawa



"The Palace of Heart with Panasonic Tower" Allison Morris, Wakayama



"Otaru Ice Festival" Allison Morris, Wakayama



"Umi Matsuri" Kayla Whitney, Miyazaki



"Guardian Gulls" Kyle Buck, Aomori

76

77

"APRIL"

*WHEN THE DESK ACROSS
FROM YOURS BECOMES HOME TO AN
UNFAMILIAR CUP*

Below train tracks in
lit pedestrian tunnels
red bricks catch shadows

枯れ枝が、
月光浴びて、
無頓着。

Beneath the moon's glare
a sky of dark blue velvet
tears at the mountains

かれえだが、
げっこうあびて、
むとんちゃく。

*"TO THE BOY WHO HAD ALWAYS SAT SILENTLY WITH
ANGRY EYES"*

Tears fall from the edge
of the distant Milky Way
yet I remain dry

☞ Christopher Carlsen, Aomori

*I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN THAT
UNDERNEATH YOUR CROSSED ARMS WAS
A VOICE LIKE SPRING RAIN*

Valleys of blossoms
canter across stony glades
not a plum in sight

☞ Jess Bertubin, Okinawa

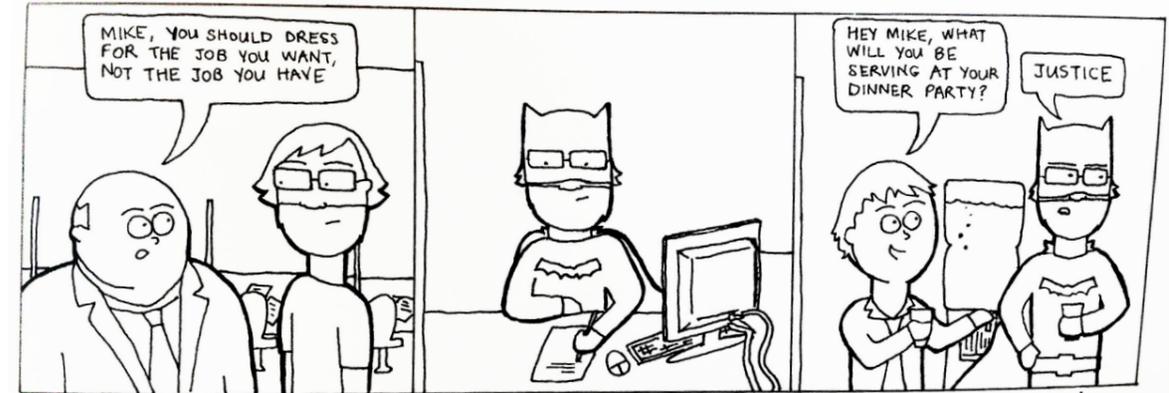
☞ Terry Dassow, Gunma



This is the space for all the artists in our community. If you have a comic or other art you've created about Japan you want to share with our readers, check out the contributors' information page, and send an email to connect.editor@ajet.net!

Here are the ones for this month!

"The Adventures of Mike" by Marika Jackson, Akita



As soon as it started to get cold last year, Marika created "The Adventures of Mike" to keep busy. This original comic series follows Mike on his quirky, everyday adventures, often accompanied by his pet owl, Owly, and his partner, Rika.

"Cultural Equivalencies: Casual" by Larissa Milo-Dale, Miyazaki



'Casual Friday'



'No-academic-classes Friday'

Between English activities both in and out of school, hosting movie nights, and travelling around Kyushu at least once a month, life is never short of incredibly busy for Larissa. You can read about her interests and antics on Twitter @larashka

"English is Hard" by Karen Lam, Kumamoto

Karen Lam is an ALT in the inaka of Kumamoto where the Kumamon roam free and the kuma doesn't actually stand for bears. Karen writes weekly comics about her life in the land of fire. Check it out at <http://ajajapan.blogspot.jp/>





STUDENTS' POP CULTURE: A BASIC GUIDE

Amanda Horton, Yamagata (2010-2013)

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We've all been there, suspended in the awkward silence that arises when you suddenly find yourself face-to-face with students OUTSIDE of class time. After exchanging the mandatory pleasantries and making a brief comment on how cold/hot it is, suddenly you realise you have nothing more to say. Instead, you start to think longingly of those tedious family gatherings or a disastrous first date. Fear not, however, for I am here to help. Having been inspired by the interest shown by my students when I started talking about manga, I decided to explore further into Japanese pop culture.

"Great idea Amanda, but where do I start?" This is what I want to help with. This will, hopefully, help bridge that language barrier and really get you interacting with your students. It's amazing how animated even the shy girls get when they start talking about boys.

I'll start with J-pop. J-pop is everywhere. You will have heard lots of it, as it is unavoidable. You would have a better chance trying

to avoid getting sick whilst working in an elementary school. So stop fighting and embrace it. You don't even need to understand the lyrics; that's the beauty of music. I guarantee that dropping a few of these names will help kick start a conversation. Let's start with the Johnnys, bands managed by Johnny and Associates Talent Agency.

Arashi (嵐 Storm)

A group of five very delicious looking guys (if you're that way inclined), they were first formed in 1999, but, after an initial success they fell into a slump. In November 2005 Arashi took off again, rising ever higher to become one of the biggest J-pop bands in Japan. In 2011 they were voted artist of the year at the Japan Golden Disc Awards. Their music style is typical cheesy pop; think the 90s and all those hours dancing around your bedroom to The Spice Girls and The Backstreet Boys, and you've pretty much gotten the idea. There's nothing terribly original about them, but they have



very catchy songs which vary between slow melodies, up-beat dance tracks, and Sakuraps. Music isn't the reason I (and many others) love Arashi so much though. The key to their success is their interaction with each other, which is so fun to watch. They are an incredibly prolific band, and almost every one of their songs is used as the theme song to some film or TV series. This is mostly due to the fact that all the members of Arashi also act in films and TV series on a regular basis. Arashi has several variety shows.

Amanda's Top Song "Monster (モンスター)"

KAT-TUN

KAT-TUN's name is an acronym based on the family names of the original members, but when Jin Akanishi left in 2010, they decided to start cheating rather than be a letter short. They were formed in 2001, but were initially backing dancers and developed a growing fan-base in this role. Johnny's, seeing the opportunity; decide to let them split off into a new band. However, it was a long and arduous five years before they found the limelight. Since their debut in 2006, they have consistently topped the charts, proving that good things come to those who wait. Their style is hard to pin down, and they generally differ from the generic happy-go-lucky pop you hear, so if I had to choose, I would class them as pop-rock. I personally find their music very hit-and-miss. They tend to bounce around a lot in terms of genre, with albums being a mix of ballads, indie-rock, RnB, and pop, which is not always a bad thing, but does give them something of a marmite effect.



Amanda's Top Song "Real Face" – Their debut song, so a little out-dated now, but I love it!

SMAP

They were formed in 1991 with 6 members. Initially they struggled to sell, with 1993 being their breakthrough year. In 1996 one member left to become a motorbike racer. After that, they launched the variety show SMAPxSMAP, which cemented their success. They have attracted a number of big name guests, with celebrities such as Michael Jackson, David Beckham, and Lady Gaga appearing on the show. SMAP are credited with being the reason Johnny's are now so successful. They were one of the first idol groups to be "a group who can do anything", branching out



from their role as a boy band and paving the way for the newer generation of Johnny's. They remain one of the most popular bands in Japan to this day, with the members being involved in a wide variety of work. It is their great personalities and inspirational, up-beat songs that really make SMAP an awesome band though, so we can forgive, and even laugh at, the odd wrong note.

Amanda's Top Song "Sekai ni Hitotsu Dake no Hana (世界に一つだけの花)"

Now that we've got you enough basic information to set even the most reluctant students giggling and chatting, let's branch out to some more influential pop artists outside the Johnnys arena.

Utada Hikaru (宇多田ヒカル)

One singer practically everybody knows is Utada Hikaru, and for good reason. She is amazingly talented and is one of the most influential singers in the world. Born in New York, Utada is fluent in both English and Japanese, and frequently sings in both. She is well-known to gamers for the Kingdom Hearts theme songs, to drama lovers for "Flavour of Life" from Hana Yori Dango 2, and to US clubbers for "Devil Inside". An accomplished musician and composer, she moved to Japan in 1997 and her debut album, First Love, is the highest selling album in Japan's history. Her style is always changing based on her mood and influences at the time, so it's hard to pin down, but therein lies her appeal (well, that and her awesome voice, and great melodies, and ... I digress). The fluidity of her music means that she'll never become boring to listen to, but it does mean she takes a lot of time over each album. Currently, she is on hiatus to travel, do volunteer work, and write new material.



Amanda's Top Songs English – "Simple and Clean" Japanese – "Flavour of Life"

Masaharu Fukuyama (福山雅治) AKA Masha, Masha-nii, Fuku-chan

The bestselling male artist in Japan, his low, deep voice is very distinctive. He steadily gained popularity after his debut in 1990 and has since become



absolutely huge, musically speaking. Everyone knows who he is. He is also a talented musician and composes his own songs. He doesn't confine himself to genre, which is why he is so successful. His beautiful, heart-felt lyrics deserve most of the credit though, as when he sings, he really lays bare his soul. In fact it is his stunning lyrics that really warm me to Masha and I (and many others) think he is a genius in this regard. An award-winning actor as well, he has appeared in numerous films and TV shows. In fact, he is in such high demand that it took NHK 3 attempts and 6 months to convince him to play the protagonist in Ryomaden.

Amanda's Top Song

"Koufukuron" (幸福論)

Ayumi Hamasaki (浜 崎 あゆみ)

You can't know J-pop without knowing Ayu. She is one of the biggest and most influential singers in Asia, as well as the most successful solo singer in Japan; think Madonna of the East. With the exception of last year, she has had a single topping the charts every year since 1999. Her voice is somewhat screechy (not really easy to listen to whilst relaxing in a bath), and she lacks the allure of other female artists. However, she writes all her own lyrics, which is really where her appeal lies, as it gives her music an emotional power that resonates whether you understand them or not. She is also constantly changing, which I see as a good thing as it makes every album refreshing to listen to, but might not appeal to some. Ayu is one of those who sets trends instead of following them, making her daring and a little over-the-top, but not in an extreme Lady Gaga kind of way.



Amanda's Top Song

Hard to choose, but I think "Moments", as it was the first song I heard.

Kumi Koda (倅 田 來未) AKA The Britney Spears of Japan

Born into a musical family, she admits that her school life was unhappy due to bullying, and thus, she developed an inferiority complex. When she debuted in 2000, she had a quiet, reserved and conservative image. By 2003, however, she had become more provocative and became known as a fashion trendsetter, starting trends such as ero-kawaii and ero-kakkoi. Her popularity continued to grow despite the controversy of her style, and she was the best-



selling artist of 2006. Her style is mainly R&B, but she ranges into pop, hip-hop, dance, and electropop, so there is something for everyone (except rock fans, but J-Rock is a whole different kettle of fish.) Her songs often include taboo themes and sexuality and she is a strong advocate for freedom of expression and love. She married Kenji03 from the Rock group BACK-ON in December after announcing she was pregnant.

Amanda's Top Song

"Real emotion/ 1000 no Kotoba" (Real Emotion/1000の言葉)

Exile



Starting off as J-Soul Brothers, they became Exile in 2001. The leader, Hiro, went to school with the president of their label, proving that it's who you know that counts. Atsushi is greatly influenced by R&B, especially the likes of Boyz II Men, and it shows in his style. Due to this, their songs tend to vary between pop and R&B, with a bit of dance and house thrown in. In general, their earlier work is R&B and their later stuff is pop. However, I don't think they could ever transform into a true cheesy J-pop band, which is probably what makes them so good.

Amanda's Top Song

"Rising Sun"

So there you have it, a quick rundown of some of the biggest names in Japan. Before you all start calling me a disgrace because I missed your favourite band, or worse, like a different song than you, please bear in mind that this is in no way a complete guide. However, I guarantee* this information will make you the coolest teacher in the school, so go forth and listen to the music. In fact, listen to a bunch of Japanese music. Find out what your students like and try to connect with them!