

AJET

CONNECT

magazine



December 2012 Issue



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Sleighbells ring/are you listening?

However hard you strain, sometimes it can be hard to hear the sounds of Christmas when you're a million miles from home. Here in Japan, all Mariah Carey Wants for Christmas is insulation, Wham! are still recovering after Last Christmas a KFC tabbehoudai deal gave them an acid reflux, and Chris Rea gave up Driving Home for Christmas when he couldn't get the nenkyu for it.

But it's not all piles of coal! Whether you've been naughty or nice this year, Connect's got a whole stocking full of Christmas cheer to help keep you afloat through the cold winter months! Staying in Japan this holiday season? Well, Culture's got you covered with your very own Festive Survival Guide! For those jetting off to warmer climes, Kathryn Strong is back offering you some top tips for in-flight fashion this winter. And, in spite of the weather, things are heating up in Japan's own Lapland as skiing season takes off in Hokkaido. Whether it's skiing, snowboarding or a sleigh-ride with Rudolf, this month's Sports section holds the definitive scoop on snow sporting in Japan!

So treat yourself this December and step into Christmas with Connect! 2012 has been an amazing year for Our Little Magazine and without you, our readers, we'd be, well... my blog :(So, however you're choosing to spend your holiday season, I'd like to wish you a Merry Christmas and a Very Happy New Year. Thanks (and congratulations!) also go to Zhiying Lu for winning this month's Photography Contest and providing us with our gorgeous cover photo. ...I can't imagine how many baubles that bad boy needs! Finally, I'd like to extend my deepest thanks to the Wisest Men and Women of all, Melania and our team of Editors. You're the star that has guided Connect to its dizzy new heights and you're bloomin' wonderful.

Stay tuned for more from Connect in 2013 – we'll be back from our Christmas break in February, refreshed and ready to get rolling on another bumper year! Until then...!

Jim





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This edition, and all past editions of AJET Connect, can also be found online at <http://ajet.net/ajet-connect/>

Editor's Welcome 2

Message from the Chair of AJET 5

Hello from Your Section Editors 6

The Stone Wall: Out in Japan? 8

For every LGBT JET that comes to Japan, the same question awaits: to come out or not? Connect Editor James Kemp talks to an array of queer JETs about their own coming out stories, and explores the historical and present-day approach of Japan to homosexuality.

Like a Boson: The Science of Santa 10

Amanda Horton returns with this month's edition of "Like a Boson", where, exclusively for Connect, she uses cold, hard scientific fact to answer your burning questions. This month, Amanda gets festive and investigates the Science of Santa.

JET Effect: Allison Barlows 13

Spotlighted in this month's JET Effect is Allison Barlows, a Hokkaido JET who serves as Coordinator for the prefecture's unique Hokkaido English Challenge. For more on Allison's experience, as well as some top tips on starting your own "English Challenge", read on!

Culture: Surviving Christmas in Japan 15

Staying in Japan this Christmas? Well, worry not because Culture Editor Sarah Blenkhorn has teamed up with JET Matthew Jones to give you some key insight into Japan's Christmas culture... including surviving your very first bonenkai!

Culture: The Traditions of the New Year 17

Whereas Christmas is very much winter's most popular season in the West, here in Japan, it's all about New Year's. Here, Sarah Blenkhorn explores the food and customs which are unique to celebrating the New Year in Japan.

Entertainment: Gamin in Japan 18

There's no shame in being a gamer—as Christmas rolls around, many of us will be asking Santa for a new platform or game to while away the cold winter months with. Steven Thompson takes a look at some common issues faced with gaming in Japan and suggest ways in which you might connect yourself with other gamers in your community.

Entertainment: Blogging Basics, Matthew Jones 20

Continuing with this month's technology theme, Matthew Jones takes a look at the recent explosion in online blogging, suggesting a few ways in which you can make your own online journal stand out from the crowd.



Events Calendar Once again, Connect's here to give you an overview of the hottest events coming up in the next two months. Check out our tailor-made Events Calendar for December and January, put together by Events King himself, Steven Thompson.	21
Events: Bright Lights in the Big City You've already read about the culture of Christmas in Japan, now Rachel DePalma takes a look at some of the events which Tokyo hosts for the festive season. If you're going to be in the capital this month, you can't afford to miss this.	24
Events: Oita AJET's Charity Tour de Kyushu It's never too late to get that New Year's resolution fixed. Christmas is traditionally a time of indulgence, but sign up to Oita AJET's Chairty Tour de Kyushu and you can feast without shame! For more information on this annual bike ride around Kyushu, read on.	26
Fashion & Beauty: The Cult of Wacko Maria In the heart of Kofu, fashion Gods and Goddesses bow down to Irie, a haute couture boutique run by Shinsuke Mizoi. Josiah Hussey sat down with the fashionista for an exclusive insight into his work.	27
Fashion & Beauty: Style Strong: Flight Clothes For many JETs, the festive season is a time of travel. With most opting for exotic locations or much-anticipated trips home, flying is the only option... and a long-plane ride doesn't have to mean your style goes out this window. Let Kathryn Strong show you how it's done in this month's installment of Style Strong.	29
Food: The Seaweed Means Happiness: Understanding Osechi Osechi ryori—or Japanese New Year's food—is a big deal in the Land of the Rising Sun. Food Co-Editor Xan Wetherall explores the meaning behind the cuisine, as well the symbolism of its individual ingredients. The results might surprise you!	30
Food: Holiday Gatherings and Tasty Tortes For foodie Ariane Bobiash, the holiday season means two things: culinary parties and tasty tortes! Find out how you can throw your own cookie exchange or decorating party this Christmas... and then learn how to make a delicious fruited Brazil nut loaf, courtesy of JET Rebecca Douglas!	32
Sports: SnowSports: Niseko Over Winter Scottish JET Andy Telfer likes to make time for an annual pilgrimage to the pistes of Hokkaido. So, with snow season approaching, his Niseko Guide reveals the highlights of this snow-sport wonderland. Be it the lowdown on the slopes, recommended après-ski hideouts or supplementary snow-fuelled divertissements and rendezvous spots, read on for insights and advice on the best of Niseko.	33
Sports: Cool Running: Chasing the Rising Sun Sorry! No bobsleighs. And no Jamaican sun either! In this article, Timothy White takes a look to the Japanese sun for inspiration. Read about Timothy's marathon adventures and learn his own, honed training technique. Then kick-start your New Year's training boost with a look at Japan's Marathon Calendar for 2013!	35

Travel: Exploring Ebisu You've been to Tokyo and, by now, you think you know it pretty well... but, do you know Ebisu? This oft-overlooked corner of Japan's capital hosts its own collection of treasures which make it well-worth a visit. Allow Elyse Hurtado to explain why.	36
Travel: 13 Hot Travel Destinations for 2013 As 2013 rolls around, Amelia Hagen forecasts her top travel picks for the year ahead. From Croatia to Sri Lanka, Switzerland to Nepal, read on for the lowdown on what's shaping up to be a hot year for travelers everywhere.	37
Volunteering: Kizuna Baby Kizuna Baby is an orphanage with a specific mission: to nurture the healthy growth of orphans through the power of human touch. Having spent time as a volunteer at the orphanage, Sophia State has seen the benefits of Kizuna Baby's massage therapy first hand. Read on for more, including information on how you too can get involved.	38
Volunteering: Second Harvest Japan, Every year, tons of food goes wasted without being eaten worldwide. In Japan, the charity Second Harvest fights to remedy that problem, redistributing food that would otherwise be thrown away. Volunteering Editor Neetha Mony explains Second Harvest Japan's work, and tells you how you can help out this holiday season.	40
Photography Contest Results	38
Education: Planet Eigo—Sample Page Struggling with lesson plans? Well, Connect is here to lighten the load! Every month, we're going to be giving you a free sample page of Planet Eigo to help in the classroom! Now who said there's no such thing as a free kyushokku? For more information on Planet Eigo and other AJET publications, check out http://ajet.net/ajet-publications/	

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MARK SAYS...

A message from the Chair of AJET

Snow is beginning to fall. Soon enough, my town will be blanketed for the rest of winter. Along with the snow, winter also marks another momentous occasion in our JET experience: re-contracting time. This will be the fourth and final time that I have to make the Big Decision...should I stay or should I go? Every year I watch people weigh the pros and cons of staying, with some agonizing over their decision until the final day. For me, it has been fairly simple every year. I ask myself, do I still love Japan? Do I still love the opportunities I am receiving here? Am I still growing?

I came here planning to do only one year. A second year wasn't even an option for me. I had a job and a life waiting for me back home. And then Japan changed all of that. I never quite believed the people who were convinced I would stay here for five years. Soon, I might finally have to admit that they were right all along!

If you are a first year considering what to do, I definitely advise you to consider staying. If you've enjoyed your Japan experience, I think that one year is just too short. There are so many joys in a second year. You finally start to get the hang of things and become really comfortable in your new life. Plus, you can step up as a leader for next year's coming JETs. Remember all the silly questions you asked when you first came to Japan? Well, now you will get to be the one answering those questions, calming nerves and helping the newbies feel more at home in Japan, exactly as your sempai JETs helped you. The full circle of this is a great experience. In my observations those JETs who leave after a year start to feel really rushed towards the end. There is so much to see and do here in Japan, a second year affords you the time to enjoy it all. That's my advice.

After year two, the choice becomes less clear. As with anything in life, with time, the shine and novelty of an experience can diminish. I know many JETs who continue to love Japan year-after-year, but I also know JETs who become a bit bored and restless. Many of my friends here are eager to start their careers and lives. For some of them, Japan isn't necessarily connected with those plans. So it's important to make sure that you also don't stay here too long. I know a few JETs who have re-contracted and then feel like they've overstayed. For me though, Japan hasn't been a vacation from my life, or a departure while waiting for my real life to begin. This has been a truly formative and defining time in my life and it has been one of my great life experiences. I know many of you who feel the same. And so I consider myself lucky in having had an easy decision each year. Whichever choice you settle on, good luck making your decisions! I also want to wish all of you a happy and relaxing winter holiday!

Safe travels!

MEET YOUR EDITORS...



Sarah Jane Blenkhorn, Culture

The holidays and merrymaking that come with the end of a year can ring hollow if you are celebrating in a foreign country, far from home. Many of us living in Japan opt for a trip home or to a sunny beach over the vacation. If you decide to stay, however, there is a lot you can do to make your holiday special. Check out our suggestions and plans for the holidays, and find out how the Japanese celebrate the New Year at home. If you've not yet experienced your first bonenkai, you can read up about them here, too! Have a merry Christmas and a happy new year!
sarah.blenkhorn@ajet.net

Amelia Hagen, Travel

You might be huddling under your kotatsu already, but winter fails to stop the year-round travel season! This month, Connect brings you an insider's take on Tokyo's Ebisu neighborhood, and introduces 2013's travel hot spots around the globe. Caught a travel bug you can't shake? Be sure to join the 'JET-setters' group on Facebook to exchange travel advice with fellow JETs from around Japan. And remember, the Tatami Timeshare group on Couchsurfing is another way to host and be hosted by JETs around the country. Safe travels this holiday season! amelia.hagen@ajet.net

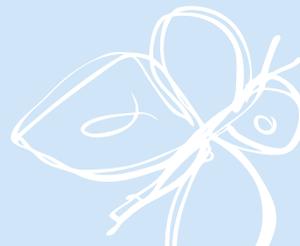


Ruth Rowntree, Sports

The big chill is finally here; and that means that the Big C(hristmas) is coming soon! Thinking ahead, is there a sport or fitness fascination you'd be keen to get into next year? It may be time to reevaluate, and restore essential energy sapped by the seasonal slog. In the meantime, this month's Sports Section brings you an adrenaline-pumped marathon-might article and inside information from the snow-sport slopes of Niseko, Hokkaido. If marathon madness and ski-trips are not-your-thing then how about contemplating Lycra-limb adventures like the Oita AJET Charity Bike Trip. The deadline for pondering your peddle power is 15th January, though the event is next March so you've plenty of time to train your thighs! Hug the heat, but also move your feet to beat the bulge this Winter! ruth.rowntree@ajet.net

Chris Barstow, Entertainment

Seeing as PCs and PSPs have long replaced socks and satsumas as staples of Santa's sack, it's only fitting that this issue's entertainment offerings have an electronic flavour. Steven Thompson talks us through all you need to know about gaming in Japan whilst Matthew Jones offers some top tips about how to channel your creative juices into making a successful online blog. Hope you have a fun and frolicsome festive season and see the year off in style! Until 2013...! chris.barstow@ajet.net





Neetha Mony, Volunteering

'Tis the season! As Thanksgiving rolls in the end of the year holidays, it's the time of year to be thankful for what you have, especially family, friends, and food. The holidays are a time when many people give to those who are less fortunate. With that in mind, December's issue features Kizuna Baby, an organization that teaches volunteers the importance of massaging babies for therapeutic orphanage visits. We'll also take a look into Second Harvest Japan, Japan's national food bank, and tell you how you can donate holiday foods or volunteer at soup kitchens. Happy Holidays! neetha.mony@ajet.net

Steven Thompson, Events

Hello and a very happy Christmahanukwanzakah to all! No matter your reason for the season, we here at Connect want it to be an amazingly good one! This month's Events section is bringing you some great ideas, as Rachel DePalma gives the rundown on Tokyo's holiday happenings. If you've been visited by three spirits recently and are feeling charitable, Oita AJET's Rhianna Aaron has the scoop on a wonderful opportunity to give back! Got something coming up you want to share? Send me a message through the series of tubes at steven.thompson@ajet.net!



Annabella Massey, Fashion:

This December, Fashion and Beauty brings you Kathryn's second 'Style Strong' column, giving us the lowdown on how to handle your look when mile high. Speaking as someone who most certainly does not have packing perfected to a fine art (and who has only recently come to the conclusion that wearing heels on board is *plane* stupid (get it?)), this advice is very much on point. Afterwards, flick to 'The Cult of Wacko Maria' to read Josiah Hussey's investigative appraisal of the attitude-laden Kofu boutique Irie and his interview with owner Shinsuke Mizoi. Going full-on OTT in all leopard-print suits and fedoras? Yes, please. Merry Christmas, everyone! annabella.massey@ajet.net



Food, Ariane Bobiash and Xan Wetherall

In this second edition of Connect's new-and-improved food section, we've got you covered for the festive holiday season! Start your own culinary journey this December by reading about ways to get together and share food with friends over the holidays, then try your hand at making a traditional Christmas fruit and nut cake... all before learning about osechi ryori, Japan's traditional New Year's cuisine! Who knew it wasn't all about the mochi? May your bellies be full this season! ariane.bobiash@ajet.net and xan.wetherall@ajet.net.





OUT IN JAPAN?

James Kemp

August. Amid fortresses of favourite-brand toiletries and more boxes of English tea than underwear, there's one last thing to pack for my morning flight to Tokyo. I consider it for a moment. It's been so long that I can't really remember what it looks like. Three years, in fact. Nevertheless, I manage to reluctantly conjure it up and stash it away. At least it won't affect my already-sighing baggage allowance ("Yes Mum, those three-tonne iPod speakers *are* an essential."). And, who knows, maybe I won't need it.

It's a situation which many soon-to-be JETs have found themselves in. Coming from years of being openly gay at home, reacquainting oneself with the confines of The Closet can be a strange experience. Unsurprisingly, then, it's natural for JETs to want to find a way out. But the motivation to do so isn't always entirely self-driven. Lauren, a second-year JET, has experienced what it's like to come out to her co-workers, and is now considering coming out to her students, too. "I want to show an example of a teacher being out and show that a person can be gay and proud", she says; in doing so, Lauren hopes that she'll be able to encourage her students to "question their own beliefs" on homosexuality. Sean, a first-year JET in rural Shikoku, also places the emphasis on his students: "when you come out to someone who's old, they're not really going to change, they'll either accept you or they won't... but with kids, I still think you have a real chance to change them for the future." If the JET Programme really is about grassroots international exchange, then, all these JETs ask is that they be allowed to do exactly what it is they're being paid for.

Of course, exchange is an inherently two-way process: so, just as JETs may want to share a piece of themselves at work, they must be prepared to confront a piece of Japan in the process. And it's in this domain that the Golden Cornerstone of the JET programme—that of Every Situation Is Different—rings true. Jarryd, a first year ALT in Osaka, received hand-written letters from his students asking "Are you gay?" ("all spelt wrong...it was hilarious"). Confirming both his staff and students' suspicions was a

revelation: "they thought it was the best thing ever! My teachers couldn't wait to come out gay clubbing with me!" At the other end of the spectrum, Sean (above) recalls the aftershocks of an intimate, post-enkai moment shared with a bisexual JTE: "Now he won't talk to me... and I don't think anybody will ever know about it; most of the time he completely ignores me."

Somewhere in the mire between these two extremes, however, it seems that, for many JETs, even the most meticulously planned coming out has, ultimately, materialised into something of a non-event. Although Lauren admits that her relationship with her JTE felt "strained" and "a little bit distant" immediately after leaving her closet behind, she confesses that, "the reaction to it was honestly not nearly as bad as I was dreading. I thought rumours would be flying everywhere and my students would know right away... sure, the men stopped chatting me up at enkais, but it seemed liked nothing really happened." Josiah's story is the same: "They didn't seem that upset or surprised, really, and nobody asked that many questions. It's pretty much remained the same since".

Such apparent indifference may be something of a surprise in a nation where it appears homosexuality is otherwise invisible. The absence of any legal sanctions—or protections—is just one facet of this invisibility. Flick through the channels on your Japanese TV, and you'll see (or rather, *won't* see) another: the media in Japan has an astounding lack of established gay role models. When Jarryd eventually did make it out gay clubbing with his JTEs, their reaction spoke for itself: "A lot of them were like, "I didn't even know this existed!" They just didn't even know that gay people existed in Japan." Little surprise then, that when Alex, a bisexual ALT and Stonewall activist, came out, she found that she was "the first person they'd ever met that was queer". The truth is, as Alex herself puts it: in Japan, it's seldom that one meets "queer people who want to be vocal". And when the voice of the Japanese gay community barely rises above a whisper, it's no surprise

that many within Japanese society claim to be unaware of its existence entirely. Even at national "pride" events, such as those hosted in Osaka last October, Alex recalls that many chose to march "covering their faces...or in the 'no photography' section". For an event predicated on the notion of "pride", such behaviour seems, at best, baffling—and, at worst, undermining of the very purpose for which such events exist in the first place.

For an explanation, one must look to the insurmountable Japanese penchant for privacy. According to Alex, the reason why such outward "pride" is not desired is simply because "most people...just [want to] keep their private lives private... One even thought things were better in Japan because there isn't any violence towards homosexual individuals here and no one cares so long as you keep your romantic life private." But rather than such behaviour being endemic to Japan's LGBT community alone, it appears that closetedness is simply the Japanese way, gay or straight. "I taught with a JTE for an entire year before realising he was married and had two teenage kids", Joe, an ALT in the Kyushu inaka, says; "...of all the teachers I've ever worked with, their personal life is rarely, if ever, talked about." And it's not just in relation to personal matters that such humbleness will arise—compliment any Japanese person on their English, for example, and you'll be knocked back with a wave of the hands and an embarrassed rebuttal. In the context of LGBT rights, then, such a desire for privacy should not be conflated with a desire against political action in itself. The fact that Japanese people are attending pride events in Tokyo and Osaka shows a real grassroots desire for change. That they are doing so in ways inconspicuous does not detract from that desire, but is merely a manifestation of the unique Japanese character.

That said, there's no denying that such an absence of outward pride is stifling the gay rights movement in Japan, both internally and externally. On the individual level, Alex recalls meeting "a lesbian couple that had no

idea there were lesbian events in Hiroshima". If the very people who would be a part of Japan's LGBT community aren't even aware of its existence, one may question how a real group identity can ever be expected to form: this is the internal problem. The external problem, then, is a consequence of this: if there's no group identity, there's no mobility, and if a group can't be mobilised, change will never ripple throughout the wider echelons of society. It's here that JETs are ideally placed to help sow the seeds for real grassroots development. Occupying a position outside of the Japanese group-based culture may, for once, be an advantage. After all, it is those *within* the group who have the most to lose by coming out. To come out as gay is to be different, and to be different is to risk exclusion from the group. But for foreigners, as Joe puts it, "They don't expect us to follow their cultural norms and they kind of expect us to be different anyway because we're foreign... so I think that being foreign and gay goes down a little bit easier than being Japanese and gay."

This being so, it may just be that it is Japan's foreign community who are capable of providing the kind of gay role models which the Japanese media is currently lacking. (This may be taken as something of an irony, considering that, historically, the foreign community played a not-insignificant role in helping cultivate homophobia in Japan during the Meiji Restoration*). When Joe tried to look for an inspirational gay figure on TV, he found nothing but "silly clown-like folks". Sean, too, recalls that, "the only [gay media personality] I've ever seen... is this one guy who was incredibly effeminate and only used feminine forms in Japanese. So if you were a gay Japanese person trying to deal with coming out and you saw all these images on TV, you might think, 'If I come out, are people going to expect me to speak like that, and put on a wig and wear lipstick?'" Although such shallow, one-dimension portrayals of gay people may be taken as evidence of latent homophobia, they may equally represent a nation whose views on homosexuality are still in something of a formative stage. Josiah believes that "Japanese people might be "homophobic" because they

think it's the status quo and it's cool to be homophobic, but once they're confronted on it they don't hold those values very deeply; they're just surprised, and very curious." It's something which Alex found when she came out to her co-workers. Taking issue with one co-worker's characterisation of her bisexuality, Alex found that he had nothing further to say: "he just looked away... he didn't want to talk about it anymore". The prejudice is there, certainly, but the manner in which it is held is less imposing and more kneejerk than the way many anti-gay rights vocalists in the West operate. It may be that this is explicable purely by the fact that the Japanese are an inherently more passive nation; but, if Josiah is correct, then just maybe the prejudice faced is more malleable than first anticipated.

Whether to tackle such prejudice head on is a decision only the individual can make; but coming out is not the only means by which to express oneself. Another may, for we teachers, be almost too obvious: classroom education. Sharon, a second year ALT, isn't out at work, but still manages to "throw cultural insights into classes: '...you know gay people can get married in these countries'"; with it, she hopes to "show [her] students that [she's] comfortable with that". Lauren, too, believes it's possible to "stand for gay rights... [without her] students necessarily knowing that" she's gay: "if they talk about marriage I can always say 'partner' instead of 'husband' or 'wife'... and I try to ask them what they feel about gay people in general and do my best to make them question their beliefs."

The options at a JET's disposal are, then, as varied as the Golden Cornerstone of the JET Programme would have you believe. Out or in, the scope for change remains. And, for all the unpredictability which this cornerstone instils, one truism still triumphs: yes, the JET contract is finite, but the virtue of courage is enduring... and, when one dares to exercise it, has the power to inspire a change for future generations and beyond.

*<http://www.seekjapan.jp/article-1/812/The+Beautiful+Way>

James Kemp is a second year JET in Ehime-ken, and is the Editor of Connect Magazine. His current favourite pastime is snatching weaves.



LIKE A BOSON: THE SCIENCE OF SANTA

Amanda Horton

It's that time of year again. The snow is piling up ominously (at least it is here in the North), every lesson is holiday themed, and you have sung Jingle Bells until you're blue in the face. Keeping with the theme, this month I have brought you the science of Santa. I did try interviewing St Nick, but he is a wee bit busy right now, and is rather enigmatic bloke at any rate. Luckily, others have also been unsatisfied with the seeming impossibilities performed by Father Christmas, and taken it upon themselves to estimate some answers. I've been scouring the deepest, darkest realms of the internet to find you these tidbits to answer all those burning questions you have.

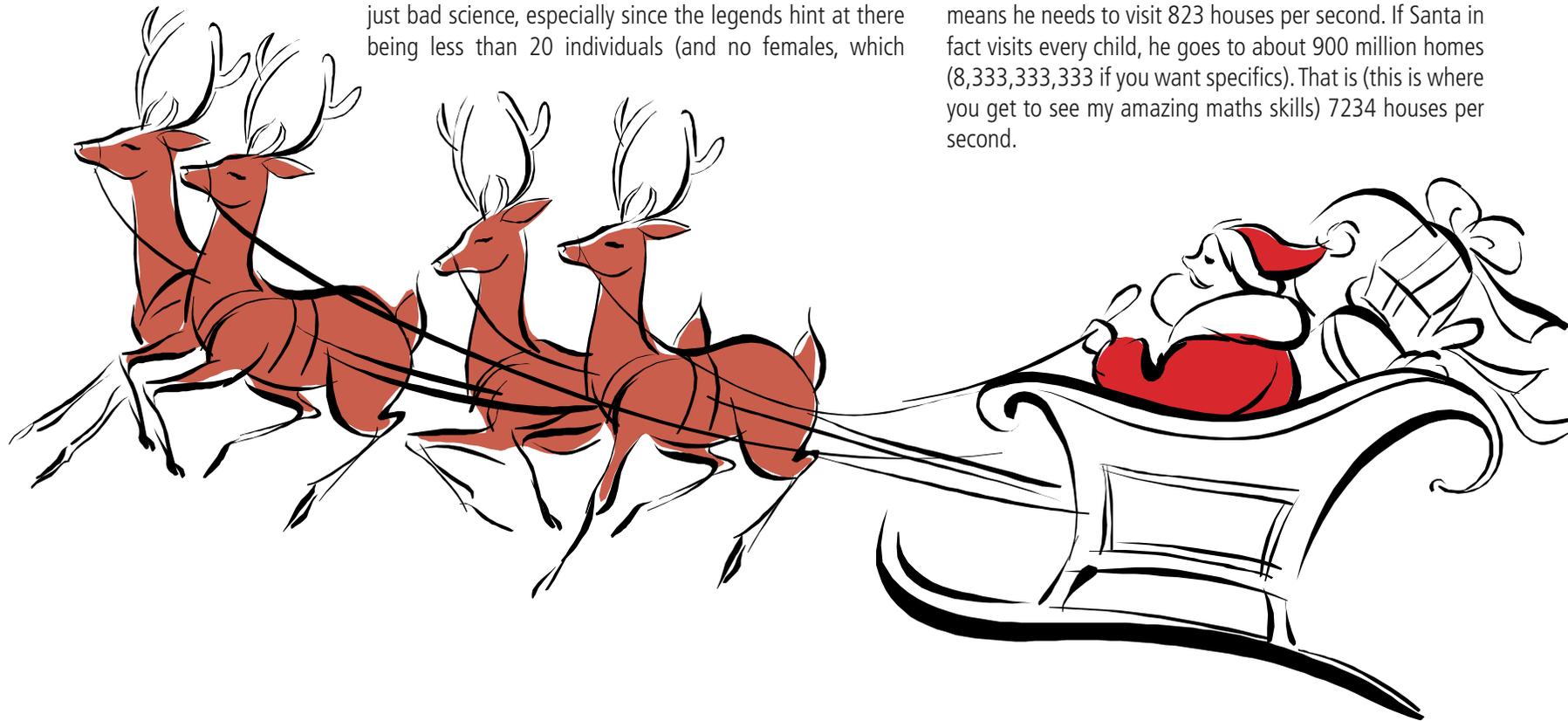
Do reindeer fly?

Well, so far, only Santa and his elves have ever seen the elusive flying reindeer species, so it is understandable that many people doubt their existence, but if you consider that there are over 30,000 species of animals yet to be classified, then ruling out flying reindeer as pure myth is just bad science, especially since the legends hint at there being less than 20 individuals (and no females, which

does raise interesting questions about their reproduction methods). Paolo Viscardi from the University of Leeds has worked out that, contrary to modern depictions of wingless mammals, the flying reindeer in fact have 33-foot wing spans in order to fly, so while inconceivable, it's not impossible.

What is Santa's breaking and entering rate?

Firstly, if we rule out Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, and Hindi children, as Santa seems to stick to the Christian households and Western-born atheists, of the world's 2.5 billion children, only about 15% can expect a visit from Father Christmas. On average, there are around 3 children per household, so that is about 92 million homes Father Christmas needs to visit. Of course, there is the whole naughty and nice part, but let's presume that every house has at least 1 good child. Now, being a smart fellow, Santa will presumably take advantage of the rotation of the Earth and give himself 32 hours of Christmas to work with. That means he needs to visit 823 houses per second. If Santa in fact visits every child, he goes to about 900 million homes (8,333,333,333 if you want specifics). That is (this is where you get to see my amazing maths skills) 7234 houses per second.



How fast does Santa fly?

Fast! Assuming all the houses are evenly distributed, Father Christmas has 1/1000th of a second to arrive at a house, hop down the chimney, put the presents under the tree, eat and drink anything left out for him (that's 92 million glasses of brandy in 32 hours he consumes btw... his liver must be indestructible). Anyway, assuming equal distribution, that is one house every .78 miles, and a total distance of 75,500,000 miles, even if we don't account for toilet breaks or sleep, the sleigh must go at 650 miles/second, that's 3,000 times faster than the speed of sound. For comparison, (more of my maths) if Felix Baumgartner had gone as fast as Santa, his jump would have been over in less than 0.004 seconds. If he (Santa, not Felix) visits every child in the world he needs to go at 10 million miles/hour.

How much does Santa's sleigh weigh?

First, let's look at the toys. Assuming every child gets one present weighing 2lb (900g), that is 321,300 tonnes of presents for 15% of the children, or 2 267 961.85 tonnes if he visits them all. Assuming every child leaves one mince pie (or cookie or whatever tasty treat that part of the world offers) and one glass of milk or brandy, we can estimate that Santa consumes, at least, 225 calories per house. If one pound of weight is 3,500 calories, St Nick gains between 2,950 – 72,898 tonnes during the night. Now, maybe flying reindeer are stronger, but on land, a reindeer can pull 300lb (136kg) of weight. If we take the liberty of assuming flying reindeer are 10 times stronger than their land-bound counterparts, we

would still need, at the very least, 214,200 reindeer to pull the sleigh.

Is it physically possible?

Taking the lowest estimates possible, we have a roughly 324,000 tonne sleigh pulled by 214,200 reindeer to 92 million homes in 32 hours, travelling at 650 miles/hour. The reindeer add 353,430 tonnes to the total mass. That much weight travelling at that speed would heat up like an asteroid entering Earth's atmosphere, effectively disintegrating the reindeer in 4.26/1000 of a second as each front reindeer absorbs 14 Quintillion (that is too many zeros to write out) joules of energy per second. As his reindeer team burst into flames, St Nick himself would be pinned back by centrifugal forces 17,500 times greater than gravity. Assuming he is a more normal 18 stone (114kg/250 pounds) that is nearly 2000 tonnes of force. If he were normal, he'd be dead almost instantly.

So Santa isn't real then?

Not necessarily. All this does not take into account the possibility of multiple Santa Clauses. If we assume that the original Mr. and Mrs. Claus spontaneously sprung into being 400 years ago, and that there are 3.5 generation per century, we are currently around the 14th generation of Santa. If each couple has 4 children, with at least 2 males, and taking into account deaths caused by the harsh arctic weather, drink-reindeer riding accidents, rebellious elves, genetic disorders due to intense inbreeding, etc, the estimated size of the Claus population is 250,000,000. That should give us 53.5million able-bodied male Clauses to adequately divide up the workload and, thus, deliver the presents without needing to subject themselves to deadly physical forces. In fact, if they only visited 15% of the children, that would be a mere two houses per Claus. They would each travel an average of 1½ miles, and if they each walked 3mph, it would take only an hour total. Assuming that modern children will all get a present, as the Claus population are extremely concerned about the melting ice

caps, and no longer distribute coal as a gift option, and assuming that all houses get an average of 11 presents, (three for each child and one for each parent) that is a total weight of 27kg (60lb). Given the short distance and light weight, and the fact that very few houses actually have chimneys nowadays, using flying reindeer seems a little overly ambitious, not to mention dangerous when flying over restricted airspace. To fund such a massive operation, the Clause population spends December sitting in shopping centres around the world gathering information on their targets.

The single Santa theory:

Not buying the hidden population idea? Okay then, let's look at the idea of a single St Nick who is apparently immortal and fireproof. One common mistake made when trying to disprove the existence of Father Christmas is limiting him to the same technology we have. That clearly can't be the case, as he began his distribution hundreds of years ago and is able to maintain a secret present-making factory, complete with workforce without alerting any of the world's intelligence services.





© Rex Features



Santa's sleigh is probably centuries ahead of current technology, including a TARDIS-like compartment for storing presents (that's a trans-dimensional space to those not acquainted with Dr. Who: it's like a Pokeball, but cooler). He could also include a stardust antimatter propulsion unit. Antimatter creates huge amounts of energy because when it comes into contact with normal matter, they rip each other to shreds and 100% of the mass becomes energy. Often seen in Sci-Fi, NASA is currently trying to design an antimatter propulsion unit which would get us to Mars in weeks. Well NASA, Santa got there first. The reindeer are simple navigational officers.

To combat combustion due to air resistance, Santa could use an ion shield of charged particles and travel in different dimensions. We travel in four dimensions, but St Nick could utilize 11 or even 26 dimensions, meaning he could simply store the presents in his warehouse and pick them up as needed in the blink of an eye. Even so, the problem of air resistance remains.

This is where wormhole theory comes in. Wormholes connect two points in space. This eliminates travelling time and distance almost completely. If Santa used wormholes and different dimensions, he wouldn't even need a sleigh.

The world's most judgmental spy.

And how about that creepy "watching children as they sleep" thing he does? Maybe he is psychic, or maybe he hacks into local security information, or maybe winter hats all contain a secret transmitter with sends brain waves to Rudolph's nose, or maybe the elves just Facebook-stalk the whole world. When it comes to actually deciding which present to give you, instead of spending the 6 years it would take to read 10 million illegible letters from children, Father Christmas has a nifty document scanner coupled with optimal character recognition software to read the notes for him.

Why has no one seen him?

I think anyone capable of visiting 92 million homes in a single night can outfox any intelligence service in the world. I like the idea that his suit and sleigh is made of light-deflecting and insulating material, thus rendering him invisible. Besides, regardless of his method of travel, he's never in one place long enough to be detected anyway.

In short, before you quickly dismiss Santa Claus as a lie told to children to bribe them into good behaviour, consider that, scientifically speaking, it isn't beyond the realms of possibility that hidden in the Arctic is a super-advanced omniscient life form, who judges you throughout the year, before breaking into your house as you sleep, eating your food and leaving you mysterious wrapped boxes made by dubious means, before drunkenly riding off into the night. Not creepy at all.

Merry Christmas everyone!



JET EFFECT: ALLISON BARLOWS

My name is Allison Barlows. I am a 4th year JET living in a seaside fishing village called Samani Town in Hokkaido. I have been involved in a competition called the Hokkaido English Challenge (HEC) since my first year, and just a month or so ago I took up the post of HEC Coordinator.

Now in its 19th year, HEC consists of two parts, the Test and the Camp, in two divisions: Junior (open to junior high school first year students in Hokkaido) and Senior (high school first years). The test content is consistent with English learned at the students' grade level, and they train with their ALT on how to take the test and practice for test day. The test is interview-style, recorded on video camera and has several sections including basic ones like listening and also unique ones, such as the "20 Questions" game. The top scoring students (up to 30th place for junior high, 20th place for senior) are invited to attend the HEC camp for free, and students that get 1st and 2nd place in the competition also receive additional English prizes, the most coveted being a home-stay to an English-speaking country for the winner of the Junior division!

I initially got involved with HEC because, from before I had even arrived on JET, my town had a history with the program. My predecessor had been an HEC Camp Coordinator, and I had students in my classes who had participated in past years. In that way, I felt it was my duty to carry on the tradition, even as I came to realize that we were the only school in our district participating. It wasn't really until the next summer when I attended my first HEC Camp that I could see what a dramatic affect the competition has on students and therefore the true meaning of the Challenge.

HEC Camp takes place in late July, after Japanese schools have let out for the summer. For five days, students stay in tents at a Hokkaido campground, and are immersed into an English-speaking environment with an all ALT staff. Samani Junior High 3rd year students Nana and Ami said that camp was like "living an English life" and that everyone was "very bright and friendly." At camp,

students have the opportunity to meet a variety of native speakers from different corners of the English-speaking world, as well as enjoy global fare such as tacos and grilled cheese sandwiches at mealtimes and, of course, take part in a lot of educational fun! Activities include crazy Olympics, capture the flag, letter-writing in English, English play performances, a dance party, a campfire with marshmallows, and more!

At camp, I saw a drastic change in the kids between the first day and the last. At the beginning there were many students looking very nervous, and I worried whether the whole experience would be too much for them. But then the HEC magic worked and by the end, even the shyest junior high school boys were running up to ALTs and pulling them into a chat...yes, in English! My students have told me that after camp, English "comes out much more quickly." I realized from experience never to underestimate my students' capacity to learn English, and also how important activities like HEC are for nurturing these hidden abilities to come shining through.

HEC is much bigger than any one person, and over the years has taken on a life of its own. Started in 1994 and still going strong, its success has been attributed to the several waves of past Hokkaido ALTs who gave their time to help write the test, stayed late after school to train their students, poured over hours of video judging submissions, and offered their summer vacations to volunteer at the camp. A HEC team for any given year consist of 2-3 coordinators





for the test and camp, 4 test writers, 15 or so judges, 30 camp volunteers, 5-6 junior leaders (returning high school students), and approximately 100 students participants (50 of which attend camp) from over 40 schools and their ALT coaches. As just one single representative of the HEC family, I give my testimonial on how HEC has positively impacted my tiny corner of Japan to hopefully get other JETs interested in creating a similar competition in their own area!

I have seen the impact of HEC in my community in wonderful and interesting ways. For example, for three years in a row HEC participants had gone on to become the student council President of Samani Junior High School, broken only recently by 2012 HEC champion Shuntaro who became the Chief Secretary (arguably the real brains of the council). Speaking about HEC, Shuntaro says that working in a group at camp taught him how to communicate with others and listen to their opinions, while still cherishing his own. I think this is a very tangible example of how HEC increases students' confidence and communication skills, not only in English, but for other facets of their life as well. Samani High School student Aoi, whose younger sister Mei attended camp this year, adds that because of her HEC experience three years ago, she is never shy to introduce herself to people, including people from other countries, and therefore makes friends easily and adapts quickly to new situations.

My one piece of advice to other JETs that might want to do something

similar to HEC is to always have a back-up plan if something unexpected happens such as, say, a bear appears at your campground the day before camp (true story!). But since that is perhaps a problem unique to Hokkaido, maybe a better example is this: every year HEC creates two complete test documents, just in case someone accidentally opens the envelope containing the test before they and their student are on camera (which is forbidden by the test rules). You don't really think about these things until they happen, so I'd like to advise others to expect a lot of bumps and to do their best to draw up contingency plans from the outset, so you don't have to go through two decades of trial and error like us!



SURVIVING CHRISTMAS IN JAPAN

If you celebrate Christmas in your home country, it is important to note that, while the trappings of Christmas have been embraced by Japan, Christmas here is nothing like Christmas at home—it's a big buildup with a tiny punch line. But you can make your own Christmas, if you decide to stay here. Sarah Blenkhorn offers some ideas to keep your holiday spirits up:

- 1) Make plans for December 24th and 25th—dinner with friends, a trip to an onsen or a love hotel...anything really. You don't want to find yourself curled up in a sea of wet tissues, listening to Stan Roger's 'First Christmas (Away From Home)' for the hundredth time, all for a lack of planning.
- 2) Cook a chicken (or splurge on a turkey). No excuses. Someone you know, or a local community centre, has an oven. It is damn easy to roast a bird. You has zee Internet, use it!
- 3) If you're spiritually inclined, find a Christmas service to attend. You might have the joy of seeing the Nativity story performed in Japanese by adorable five-year-olds, as I rather accidentally did, and trying to wing the Japanese version of 'Silent Night' (have you seen the Mister Bean episode where he tries to sing a hymn he doesn't know? Yeah, that was me.)
- 4) Start saying 'Merry Christmas' to people—the checkout clerk, your co-workers, or your neighbour, for example. The reaction is generally very satisfying—like they've been smacked in the face with Christmas.
- 5) Have a Christmas Eve sleepover with your friends and wake up together to open stockings and have a Christmas brunch. Have a pillow fight, if you want to.
- 6) Have a Christmas movie night. Stock up on snacks and pillows and curl up in the *kotatsu* with some friends (extra body heat - an added bonus). Don't forget the *mikans*!
- 7) Decorate a gingerbread house with all the candy trimmings you like—icing, chocolate chips, candy sprinkles... then eat it, like the naughty Hansels and Gretels that you are.
- 8) Embrace your inner goof. Wear the Christmas sweater your mother sent you. Add reindeer antlers or a Santa hat. Spread the Christmas cheer!
- 9) Send Christmas cards! It might be too late to send them home, but you can certainly mail them to friends in Japan or give them to your co-workers and neighbours. For added twee, make your own.
- 10) Of course, Christmas is a workday, but there's no reason not to bring a little Christmas cheer to work (but not in a Thermos of rum and eggnog). Sing or

play Christmas carols, bring home-made Christmas cookies, or have a Secret Santa gift exchange. If you can't manage that level of Christmas spirit, take the day off. Go back to 1) for inspiration!

Here are JET Matthew Jones' tips for an enjoyable Christmas:

Christmas in Japan. Will you be sticking it out, or will you be heading home to the loving arms of your family? PAH! Family shmamily! I'll be staying here, secure in the warm embrace of "Christmas is a working day" Japan.

Just because you stay in the country over the holiday period doesn't mean you have to stay in your private little corner of Japan. With some careful application of *nenkyuu*, you can arrange a fairly sizeable vacation for yourself.

Christmas Day should not be spent alone or even *gulp* at the office. There is no sense in denying that we will miss the taste of a home-cooked meal or opening prezzies as the sun comes up. However, arranging a Kris Kringle gift exchange with your fellow ALTs and grabbing a traditional KFC Christmas chicken can stave off some of those holiday blues.

Japan also has some outstanding attractions for those of you who intend to do a bit of travelling. If you're craving a winter wonderland, look no further than Sapporo. The highlight has to be the choir singing and light displays in Odori Park, where you can also find a German themed market featuring some very fine European food: beer and sausages. What else could you ask for? Skiing and snowboarding? You really are demanding... Well, have no fear, for Sapporo, and Hokkaido in general, features some of the best locations for snow sports in the world. Add this to the fact that Sapporo should be on your 'to-do' list for Japan anyway, and you've got yourself the perfect holiday. Perfect, if you like the cold, that is.

Kyushu rarely gets temperatures below zero, even in the dead of winter. With some fantastic historical sites and

brehtaking views, Nagasaki is the crown jewel of Kyushu. As the site where Western trade was first established, Nagasaki has a strong European influence and Christmas is a major holiday. The Dutch-themed amusement park Huis Ten Bosch puts on shows on every major holiday, and Christmas is no different. Resplendent with windmills, castles and canals, Huis Ten Bosch is something that has to be seen to be truly appreciated.

I don't think I can go any further without mentioning Tokyo. If Japan is known for going a little overboard when it comes to festivals and events, Tokyo takes that and scales it up a few notches. You won't be able to walk anywhere without hearing 'Jingle Bells' or seeing Santa Claus in shop windows. Christmas in Tokyo will violently and remorselessly attack all five of your senses... in a good way.

As for myself, I will be leaving Nagasaki on St. Stephen's Day, after taking part in a group dinner with ALTs with, of course, a KFC chicken. From there, we're heading to Tokyo to attend the four-day New Year's 'Countdown Japan' festival. After that, we will hit up Kyoto for some relaxing culture and temples before heading home to start work again.

So, no matter what you do, make sure you get the most out of your Christmas holidays, and as we say in Ireland: Nollaig Shona Duit, Merry Christmas!

Another key part of surviving Christmas in Japan is surviving your bonenkai—or year-forgetting party. Sarah Blenkhorn tells you how...

Whether you work in a school or an office in Japan, chances are that your place of work will have a *bonenkai*, or 'year-forgetting party', to put the past year to bed. It is an important part of the end of the year, so if you can, you should try to attend.

The *bonenkai* is one of the biggest work gatherings of the year, and lacks the solemnity of the farewell parties

in March and the awkwardness of the welcome parties in April. The goal of the *bonenkai* is to put the past year firmly behind you with fun and celebration—and for many, a prodigious amount of alcohol. If you haven't heard the humorous Japanese English term '*nomunication*,' now is as good a time as any. *Nomunication* is 'communication through drinking together,' and the idea behind it is a key feature in Japanese work relationships. Relaxing while eating and drinking together is considered an excellent way to build and strengthen bonds between co-workers.

Usually a school or company department is put in charge of organizing the *bonenkai* and one member of that department is charged with collecting names, booking a banquet room and giving information. At the party, they will act as master of ceremonies and prepare comic or musical entertainment. There's even a chance you'll see your male co-workers in drag, probably dancing to AKB48. Be prepared.

After this party, there will be a *nijikai* ('second party') and most likely a *sanjikai* ('third party'). There is no requirement for you to go to those parties, though after being plied with beer and hot sake, you may think it's a pretty darn good idea.

Some *bonenkai* survival tips:

- arrive ten or fifteen minutes early, so as not to keep people waiting.
- pour drinks for your tablemates, and wait for them to pour your drink. It's bad manners to pour your own.
- pace yourself. Tea and juice are always available if you don't drink, or if you want to switch it up a little. Take small sips if someone wants to pour you a drink.
- you may be asked to perform or make a small speech if your department is in charge of the party. If so, one ALT has this gem of advice: "When making a speech, don't confuse the words *bimyou* (doubtful) and *binyuu* (beautiful breasts)!"

Fancy a chat?



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THE TRADITIONS OF THE NEW YEAR

Sarah Blenkhorn

In Japan, *Oshougatsu*, the New Year, is the most important holiday of the year. It is a happy time for families to come together, share many kinds of traditional foods, and welcome the coming of a new year with many old customs and traditions. If you haven't yet encountered the Japanese New Year, here's a short guide to what your Japanese friends might be doing over the holidays.

The Food

O-sechi ryori are New Year's dishes served in square lacquered trays, which are often stacked. Traditionally, cooking fires were not lit during the first three days of the year, so housewives made many dishes prior to that to be eaten cold over the holiday. Over the years, the different foods acquired symbolic meanings, such as prosperity and long life. *Ozouni* is a soup made with *mochi*, which is made differently in different regions of Japan. It is eaten on New Year's Day. Another popular dish is *oshiruko*, a sweet soup made with red adzuki beans and *mochi*. A holiday drink is *otoso*, which is made with spiced sake. Drinking it with your family is supposed to guarantee good health. *Mochi*, or rice cakes, are a popular food, too – a student of mine boasted that he had eaten ten rice cakes at one sitting! Special rice cakes, called *kagami mochi*, are neatly stacked with an orange on top and used as a holiday decoration.

The Customs

Otoshidama, as schoolchildren will gleefully tell you, is a gift of money given to children by their relatives. They get this yearly bonanza until they reach the age of about twenty. *Nengajyo* are cards delivered on January 1st that contain greetings and well wishes for the coming year.

An onerous 'custom' for schoolchildren is **homework**, which piles up in the winter vacation.

Some of the games played on New Year's Day include *karuta*, a poem-matching card game, *takoage*, or kite-flying, and *hanetsuke*, a game like badminton. The loser of *hanetsuke* has her face smudged with ink. Following the holiday, in many districts a *tondoyaki*, or *dondoyaki*, is held at which all of the New Year's decorations are burned on a huge bonfire. Sometimes *mochi* is roasted over the flames, like a marshmallow or wienie roast.

The New Year's "Firsts"

Hatsumode is the first visit of the New Year to a shrine or a temple to pray for a good year, usually made on January 1st-3rd. One common custom is to buy *omikiji*, a paper fortune, to check out your prospects for the coming year. People hope for 'Daikichi' or 'Great Fortune,' but if the fortune is bad, people tie it to a tree at the shrine and leave their bad luck behind. *Hatsuyume* is the first dream of the New Year which might predict your year's fortune. Dreaming of Mount Fuji, a hawk, and an eggplant is considered particularly lucky. *Hatsuhinode* is the name for the first sunrise viewed on January 1st. Other firsts include *kakizome*, the first calligraphy of the New Year, and the year's first *haiku*.

If you happen to be in Japan for the New Year, be sure to try some of these foods and customs for yourself, and make some special memories.

良いお年を！ Yoi o-toshi wo!
Happy New Year!

GAMING IN JAPAN

Steven Thompson



Recently, I've been hearing a lot of people grumbling "winter is coming" in a gruff, quasi-British voice. Although their choice of tone is questionable, the stark truth of the message is unavoidable: like it or not, winter is, indeed, coming. Even for those who aren't partial to the cold, winter is a great time to be a gamer; as you spend more hours under your *kotatsu* blankets or huddled around your heater, you'll have ample time to play through your backlog of games. I'm here to help you maximize that time, answer some common questions, and connect you with other expat gamers. Although the emphasis here is on current generation games (PC, PS3, 360, Wii, 3DS, and PSP), it should be noted that Japan still has a fantastic retro and arcade gaming scene, and you should by all means capitalize on this.

The first big question concerns regions. Can you bring your games and consoles from home? While internationalization is our primary goal in being here, you'll find that consoles and games from different countries do not play nice. The main regions are: Japan (NTSC-J), North America (NTSC-U/C), Europe/Australia (PAL), and China (NTSC-C). If you try to play a game from a different region on a console with region-locking, you're going to run into problems. If you have an American Wii console and try to play a Japanese game on it, you'll get nothing but a 6,000 yen coaster. Here's a rundown of the consoles to help you decide from which country to buy your games and hardware if you want to play in Japan:

- ◆ **Nintendo Wii** – Region locked, all games and hardware versions.
- ◆ **Nintendo 3DS** – Region locked, all 3DS games and hardware versions. DS games played on a 3DS are region-free.
- ◆ **Nintendo DS** – No region lock for DS models. DSi is region locked for downloadable titles only.
- ◆ **Sony PS3** – All games (except the recent *Persona 4: Arena*) are region free. Backwards compatible PS1 and PS2 games are region locked, as well as Blu-ray and DVD movies. Note that Playstation Store content, such

as DLC, must be purchased from the country's store the game is from (US DLC for US games, for example). Save files cannot be shared from region to region, either. So if you started a game in England, you can't continue it on a Japanese version of the same game, despite having an English save file.

- ◆ **Sony PSP** – UMD games have no region locking. UMD movies do. All models.
- ◆ **Playstation Vita** – No games released thus far have region locking.
- ◆ **Xbox 360** – Region lock varies from game to game. Publisher decides. See (http://gaming.wikia.com/wiki/Region_Free_Xbox_360_Games) for a full list.

What about PC? My best recommendation is to utilize a direct-download service such as Steam or Amazon, which allow you to legally purchase and immediately download titles. This will not only get you your games quicker, but help you get games in English without worrying about region restrictions (although, in general, PC games lack region restrictions). However, direct downloads can run into release date issues, as many such services perform a check of your IP to see what country you're in and when the game is set to release in that country. You can change the IP address of your connection using a virtual private network (VPN). There are many good resources for this available online, and a VPN provides extra security and privacy while using the internet for any purpose.

Once you know you're able to play a game on your hardware of choice, you'll want to make sure you can understand it. A good general rule is that, if it was imported into Japan, then the game will have English language options (for example, *Grand Theft Auto* or *Call of Duty*); if the game is a Japanese game that would later be exported abroad (such as the newest *Final Fantasy* or *Metal Gear Solid*), it will likely only have Japanese language options. When in the store, you'll want to check the back of the box to see if either the audio or subtitles (字幕 *jimaku*) have English (英語 *eigo*) options. If you're in doubt, just look for that English kanji anywhere on the box, or ask for some help! Also check to



see if the game is an imported copy of the game (and where it was imported from!) These products will be marked with 輸入版 (*yunyuu-ban*), and labeled by region, such as North America (北米 *hokubei*), UK (連邦王国 *renpououkoku*), and other countries like China (中国).

There is, of course, no shortage of places to buy games in Japan. Anywhere from your big *denki* shops that also sell cell phones, TVs, and movies, to Japan's ubiquitous recycle shops. I'd recommend the latter, as buying used games will not only net you a better price, but usually you'll be offered more forgiving return policy and a broader selection than buying brand new from a department store like Yodobashi.

One of the easiest things you can do is to order online, with amazon.jp and play-asia.com being the most popular and well-stocked options for online game shopping. Both have English versions of the site, although you may still need the above kanji to make sure you're buying the right products.

After getting your games, you'll need people to play with. Although you can't beat the experience of four players on the same couch shouting at each other and eating snacks, putting on your headset and getting online is still a great way to connect with people, release some steam, and stay sane this winter. I'd recommend starting a group for the gamers in your prefecture to connect, arrange meetups and times, discuss, praise, and bash. No matter what genre you're into, I guarantee you can find like-minded people to play with. Try starting a group through a social network

like Facebook (you can always get your AJET or Block reps to help you spread the word!) or through online gaming communities like Steam or Battle.net. Make a guild, form a clan, whatever you like! To test the waters, a few months ago I created both a Fukushima gamers Facebook group and Steam group (Gamers in Fukushima, anyone's welcome to join, of course!), in order to organize these things and bring the gamers in the prefecture together, and the response was immediate and awesome. Now we have almost a hundred Fukushimians playing online, sharing deals, and swapping stories. No matter what games we play, we're able to share it with each other.

As with any of your hobbies or interest, share them with your students and the people in your town too! You may even be able to play together with your students. Just make sure the game is age-appropriate and that you receive prior permission from your supervisor. Find out what games are popular and look into getting into them! A non-exhaustive list of popular games and series at the moment includes: Monster Hunter, Resident Evil (Biohazard), Dragon Quest, Pokemon, Call of Duty, Kingdom Hearts, FIFA and Winning Eleven, Metal Gear, Persona, Tales of, and games based on popular anime like Naruto, Rurouni Kenshin, and One Piece.

This winter, whether it's to better connect with your students, keep in touch with people in your prefecture, or stave off snow madness, get your game on in Japan. Maybe I'll see you online.

Steven is a second year ALT living in Fukushima. If he's not driving around aimlessly and listening to music, then he's probably playing games. He can be found on both PS3 and Steam under the super-cool name of "distantshores" and welcomes a little challenge.



BLOGGING BASICS

Matthew Jones

"I can't wait to put this on my blog!"

We have all encountered web-blogging in some shape or form, whether it's a writer talking about their next piece of work, or a personal collection of thoughts. More recently, the idea of a short five minute video-blog, or vlog, has started to take over Youtube too. Chances are that if you look for a recipe online, the page you find is somebody's blog, documenting their life and culinary exploits.

A great example of this new style of entertainment would be the 'Vlogbrothers'. John and Hank Green spent an entire year with no form of communication other than a new vlog each day. Putting their entire lives online for people to see captured the hearts of thousands of fans, known as 'Nerdfighters', who subsequently formed their own online community, 'Nerdfighteria'. The vlog where one Nerdfighter proposes to his girlfriend via John's vlog is guaranteed to bring a smile to your face.

At other times, these blogs transform into something far greater. The ever-popular stars of 'Epic Meal Time' have grown and grown in scale until they have become minor celebrities in their own right: their over-the-top cookery and narration create a concentrated five minutes of bacon-filled goodness... wrapped in bacon... and topped with bacon... with more bacon on the side.

But how can we apply this to the JET programme? Well, JETs have a pretty unique and interesting lifestyle, and as we've all heard oh so many times before, every one of our

situations really is different! So, how should you approach creating your own blog? Cookery show? Travelogue? Diary? The choice is really up to you, but there's a few pointers you should follow before setting off.

But wait- why am I giving advice? Well it's pretty simple. When I applied to the JET Programme, I started a blog which I promptly forgot about. When I arrived in Japan, I started a new one, but things got busy and the blog got forgotten. Now, a few months on, I'm starting my *third* blog, and this time, I'll keep up with it...

Firstly, you have to know what you want to do. If your comedic journal ends up being more about local restaurants, people will lose interest. You have to be consistent and know what you want to do. People like short five minute chunks of information, so not only does each post have to grab your audience's attention, but it has to be easily accessible.

Also, make sure to concentrate on something you are passionate about. I'm obsessed with food, so my new blog will feature recipes and restaurant reviews. To keep things lively though, I'll have a few updates from my travels.

Finally, and most importantly: limit yourself. You won't always be able or motivated to make a new entry every day, but if you know that every Wednesday is 'blog day', then that will prevent you from losing track of yourself. Trust me, if there's one thing I know about blogging, it's how to forget about blogging...

So what's your passion? Jogging to mountaintops? Cooking? Your life as a teacher? Combine that passion with a little dedication and some jokes and you've got yourself a blog!

Matthew Jones is a 1st year ALT in Nagasaki City. He signed up to the JET Programme mostly to get a free pen.



JAPAN EVENTS

DECEMBER 2012 - JANUARY 2013

Don't see your area here? Have an upcoming event you're super excited for? Let's put them on the calendar and spread the love! Contact Events at steven.thompson@ajet.net with the details!

Event name	Location	Date
Festivin	Shibuya, Tokyo	December 9th
For those who dream of vineyards and call themselves oenophiles, Shibuya's Hikarie will be the place to be, with a selection of 300 natural wines and over 50 restaurants selling food. http://festivin.com/?page_id=29#		
Gishi-sai	Osaka, Osaka	December 9th
In case Tokyo's celebration of the 47 ronin is too much of a downer, this child-friendly version also features martial arts demonstrations and free soba noodles. http://www.osaka-info.jp/en/search/detail/event_63.html		
Gishi-sai	Minato, Tokyo	December 14th
The 47 Ronin is one of the best-loved and well-known stories in Japanese culture. At and around Tokyo's Sengaku temple, on the anniversary of the raid, large crowds gather to pay their respects and observe a procession of those dressed as the 47 masterless ronin. http://tokyo-tokyo.com/Sengakuji.htm		
Yassai Hossai	Sakai, Osaka	December 14th
At the lwatsuta shrine, 108 bundles of firewood are burned, and people carrying a man dressed as Ebisu on their shoulders run across the coals for good fortune. Just in case normal firewalking wasn't interesting enough for you. http://www.sakai-tcb.or.jp/spot/spot.php?id=32		
Setagaya Boroichi Flea Market	Setagaya, Tokyo	December 15th – 16th
An enormous and crowded flea market that's been running nearly 500 years. Held each year in December and January, hundreds of stalls line along Boroichi Dori with vendors selling many new and used items to tens of thousands of visitors. http://www.timeout.jp/en/tokyo/event/2874/Setagaya-Boroichi		

Event name	Location	Date
Kasuga Wakamiya-On Festival	Nara, Nara	December 15th – 18th
Lasting for 4 days, the best events are on the 17 th , known as Hon-matsuri, and features traditional arts and music passed down since the 12 th century. There's also a procession of the eras similar to Kyoto's, where you can watch history move past you in a grand parade. Held annually at the Wakamiya temple near Kasuga Taisha Grand Shrine, this festival is a designated intangible folk cultural property. http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/location/spot/festival/kasugawakamiyaon.html		
Sensoji Hagoita Ichi	Asakusa, Tokyo	December 17th – 19th
In the district around Sensoji, vendors sell traditional ornamental New Years goods like hagoita (battledores) which are adorned with beautiful artwork and bring luck in the coming year. Like in November's Tori-no-ichi, the shopkeepers will all clap and cheer in rhythm every time one is sold. http://www.senso-ji.jp/annual_event/osamenogoennichi.html		
Ameyoko Year's End	Ueno, Tokyo	After December 20th
Around the end of the year, the Ameyoko district in Ueno, once an American-goods black market, brings out many bargains and end-of-the-year goods to clear out stock. New Years items are popular buys, but the district has shops and stalls for everything from watches and shoes to video games and movies. http://www.ameyoko.net/		



Event name	Location	Date
Osame-no-Daishi	Adachi, Tokyo	December 21st
At Nishiarai Daishi temple, year-end festivities are celebrated with a large market selling traditional goods and charms and musical performances by various talents. http://www.nishiaraidaishi.or.jp/event/#event12_1		
Emperor Akihito's Birthday	Imperial Palace, Tokyo	December 23rd
One of two times during the year when the palace is open to the public (the other being January 2 nd), the Emperor will make several appearances on a protected balcony to greet and give a speech.		
Star Light Revue	Nagoya, Nagoya	December 24th
Although the brilliant illuminations at Nagoya Port's Garden Futou will be lit from the end of November (including a 15m-high Christmas tree), the real spectacle comes on Christmas Eve, with a musically synced fireworks display set off over the water and a jazz-orchestra concert. http://www.nic-nagoya.or.jp/en/e/archives/2427		
Sapporo Munich Christmas Market	Sapporo, Hokkaido	Until December 24th
Sapporo's Odori park is lit up all throughout November and December, with a Christmas market set up for all your shopping needs. A nice little winter wonderland in the middle of the city.		
Sacred Straw Hanging	Higashi-Osaka, Osaka	December 25th
This designated intangible cultural folk property is a Shinto ritual originating in the Amano Iwato opening of ancient mythology. In order to joyfully welcome the spring to come, priests and worshippers laugh at the opening of the temple. http://www.osaka-info.jp/en/search/detail/event_7092.html		
Namahage	Oga, Akita	December 31st
A group of ogres walk along the streets shouting out things like "Are any children disobeying their parents?" "Anyone being lazy and not doing housework?" while carrying wooden knives and knocking on doors. They're received in formal dress and warmly welcomed in, after which they bless the family for the new year. http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/location/spot/festival/oganamahage.html		
Oji Fox Parade	Oji, Tokyo	December 31st
Between Oji's Shozoku Inari and Oji Inari shrines, one can see a parade of fox people dressed in ceremonial temple garments making their way to Oji Inari in order to welcome the New Year. Small bonfires are lit and special lanterns (kitsune-bi) are carried throughout. http://tokyo-tokyo.com/Oji.htm		

Event name	Location	Date
First Sunrise Flights	Narita & Haneda Airports, Tokyo	January 1st
Offered by both JAL and ANA, these flights will take you near Fuji just as the sun rises on the new year. Ticket price also gets you nihonshuu, osechi youri, and various memorabilia. http://www.jal.co.jp/domtour/hatsuhinode/ http://www.ana.co.jp/dom/promotion/hatsuhinode2013/tokyo.html		
Falconry Exhibition	Hamarikyu, Tokyo	January 2nd – 3rd
Once a noble sport of the samurai, falconry is something of a lost art nowadays. Take advantage of this opportunity to see it in action at the Hamarikyu Gardens. http://www.japantoday.com/category/events/view/falconry-exhibition-2		
Treasure Ball Festival	Fukuoka, Fukuoka	January 3rd
One of the three main festivals of Kyushu with a history of 500 years. Two teams, a sea and a land team, scramble and fight to capture and raise up an 8 kg metal ball, all the while soaked in freezing cold water. The crowd also participates. It's crazy. http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/location/spot/festival/tamaseseri.html		
World Commercial Festival	Osaka, Osaka	January 5th – 6th
Dedicated to the greatest, funniest, and best commercials (CMs) around the world, this festival at the Umeda Arts Hall is an all day screening with various drawings and events throughout the weekend. http://www.cmfestival.com/		
Dezome Shiki	Ariake, Tokyo	January 6th
A New Year's parade of firemen, firetrucks, and helicopters praying for a good year and raising awareness of fire safety can be seen every year at Tokyo Big Sight. Acrobats dress as Edo-period firemen and perform dangerous stunts to demonstrate the danger of fire. http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/location/spot/festival/dezomeshiki.html		
Takasaki Daruma Ichi	Takasaki, Gunma	January 6th – 7th
Takasaki's Shorinzan Daruma Temple is the capital of Japan's famous daruma doll. Many people buy daruma at the beginning of the year and make a wish. Similar daruma festivals will be held throughout Japan. http://www.daruma.or.jp/eng/index.html		



Event name	Location	Date
Usokae	Dazaifu, Fukuoka	January 7th
Held to celebrate the scholar Sugawara no Michizane, regarded as a deity of learning and truth, people come to exchange wooden carvings of bullfinches (uso) with one another. Bullfinches are believed to carry the lies of people, and this festival allows you to exchange your old lies for a fresh start. At night, the festival becomes one of Japan's three largest fire festivals. http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/location/spot/festival/usokae.html		
Oniyo Fire Festival	Kurume, Fukuoka	January 7th
The last of Japan's three major fire festivals, giant bonfires are lit to drive away evil spirits. Held at Daizenji Tamataregu Shrine. http://kurumenmon.com/daizenji/oniyo/oniyoasetumei.htm		
Grand Sumo Tournament	Sumida, Tokyo	January 10th – 24th
The year's first grand sumo tournament, held at the Ryogoku Kokugikan Hall. Matches tend to start at 4 pm except on the final day of the tournament, when it's 3 pm. Sumo is something you should see at least once in Japan! http://www.sumo.or.jp/eng/		
Ten-Day Ebisu	Osaka, Osaka	January 9th – 11th
The peak of the ten-day festival takes place over these days, when participants of all ages take part in fire walking over hot coals at Imamiya Ebisu Shrine. On the 10 th , a magnificent festival of luck featuring celebrities and geisha culminates in a gift-giving parade. http://www.osaka-info.jp/en/search/detail/event_4.html		
Tokyo Auto Salon	Chiba, Tokyo	January 12th – 13th
At the enormous Makuhari Messe convention center, anyone looking to upgrade or trick out their car will be able to find something at this collection of parts and electronics for any car you can imagine. http://www.tokyoautosalon.jp/		
Toh-shiya Archery Contest	Kyoto, Kyoto	January 13th
At 120 feet long, Kyoto's Sanjusangendo is the longest wooden structure in the world. Since its founding, there have been archery competitions there, but none so grand as this. Hundreds compete, and the contest coincides with Japan's coming-of-age ceremonies, so young men and women formally dressed line up and let the arrows fly. http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/location/spot/festival/tohshiya.html		
Doya Doya	Osaka, Osaka	January 14th
At Shitennoji, two teams of loincloth-clad young men struggle mightily for the Goo Hin, a cow god amulet. http://www.osaka-info.jp/en/search/detail/event_5.html		

Event name	Location	Date
Deadline to register for Oita charity bike ride		January 15th
If you read Rhianna's article (and we know you did!), you'll know that this is the last day you can sign up to participate in OitaAJET's amazing Kyushu bikeride to support Indonesia's Foundation 18! Don't forget! http://www.facebook.com/events/385313528213448/?fref=ts		
Setagaya Boroichi Flea Market	Setagaya, Tokyo	January 15th – 16th
An enormous and crowded flea market that's been running nearly 500 years. Held each year in December and January, hundreds of stalls line along Boroichi Dori with vendors selling many new and used items to tens of thousands of visitors. http://www.timeout.jp/en/tokyo/event/2874/Setagaya-Boroichi		
Bonden Fighting Festival	Akanuma, Akita	January 17th
Bonden festivals are held throughout Akita at this time, but the biggest and most exciting is at Mt. Taiheizan's Miyoshi shrine. Groups race up the mountain while carrying bonden (4 meter long poles which serve as markers for gods to descend to) to the shrine. In order to be first, they push and grapple and shove their way up the mountain. http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/location/spot/festival/bondensai.html		
Yamayaki	Mt. Wakakusayama, Nara	January 26th
This mountain burning is held the fourth Saturday of January every year. According to the stories, the mountain was originally lit ablaze to settle a border dispute over Kofuku-ji and Todai-ji. As the mountain is first lit by sacred fire, hundreds of fireworks are also set off. http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/location/spot/festival/yamayaki.html		
Kushimoto Fire Festival	Kushimoto, Wakayama	January 26th
The field in front of the Shiono Misaki Watchtower, on Honshu's southernmost point, is ritually burned by flaming arrows. If you feel brave, you can walk through the field as it burns. There's also Turkish folk dancing. http://www.kankou-kushimoto.jp/yotei.html		
Osaka International Women's Marathon	Osaka, Osaka	January 27th
Starting at the Nagai Stadium Athletic Field, and running both half and full marathons, this event welcomes participants from all over the world, and serves as a selection for Olympic participants in the coming years. http://www.osaka-marathon.jp/		



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BRIGHT LIGHTS IN THE BIG CITY

Rachel DePalma



The KFC I pass on my walk home has been blasting “All I Want For Christmas Is You” since November 1st. There’s already a sign in their window advertising how long they’ll be taking reservations for Christmas Eve takeaway. And on December 24th, there will be a line of hopefuls stretching around the block, waiting in the cold for their paper buckets of Christmas cheer.

It almost sounds like an after school special about how consumerism has made us all forget the true “reason for the season,” but this is just Christmas in Tokyo. For family togetherness and good cheer, you’ll have to wait until New Year’s; Christmas is a time for romance... and KFC. Legend has it that long ago, a hapless expat wandered in from the cold asking for fried chicken to fill the turkey-shaped void in his Christmas eve. Then in 1974, they began marketing with the slogan “Christmas = Kentucky,” and the rest is history.

It’s been over three years since I moved to Japan, but sometimes I forget how different Christmas is here. I asked a coworker how he’s preparing for the holiday and when he told me excitedly, “I’m married and we have a kid now, so I don’t have to do **anything**,” my eyes almost popped out of my head. While Santa will no doubt be visiting their apartment, nobody has to stress about making Baby’s First Christmas picture perfect or about making a reservation on one of the biggest date nights of the year.

Anticipating these dates, fancy restaurants put on course dinners and buffets, many of which top ¥100,000 per person. As Rocket News recently reported, Cold Stone Creamery now offers an adorable Christmas cake with an engagement ring box as the centerpiece. And people looking for traditional fare still have a lot of options.

Hobgoblin’s Christmas dinners and turkey buffets are always popular, and Good Honest Grub has a Christmas week menu that includes fantastic-looking vegetarian options. Of course you can always trust Metropolis’ recommendations in these matters, but if you’re more the DIY type, you can host your own traditional Christmas feast with a little help from your friends The Meat Guy and Costco. And with decorations from the *hyakuen* shop, you can deck the halls without breaking the bank.

Not to say there aren’t lovely decorations to be seen around town; Christmas lights are something in which Tokyo excels. Caretta Shiodome puts on a beautiful display every year. It’s just a short walk from Nihon TV’s illuminations and Shiodome Station, where you can hop on the monorail to see the enormous Odaiba Memorial Tree. The length of Marunouchi Nakadori Street is lit up, making for a beautiful nighttime stroll, and Akasaka Sacas boasts not only Christmas lights but a skating rink. And of course the ever-stylish Roppongi Hills and Ginza are not to be missed, but it’s also lovely to tour Yebisu Brewery until it gets dark and then watch Yebisu Garden Palace light up.

A few of these areas keep their decorations up for quite some time (in fact, some have been known to run until Valentine’s Day), but the sad truth is that after Christmas ends, the excitement level gets dialed down considerably. As year-end holidays begin, people trickle out to their family homes to celebrate the New Year and the city empties out. It may seem a bit bleak, but the lack of crowds makes it a good time to explore the city. However, many tourist attractions close down between the 29th and the 4th, so check ahead of time!

If you prefer a big, epic New Year’s Eve to the quiet affair that is traditional in Japan, Tokyo has plenty to offer you. Ikebukuro Sunshine City and Tokyo Tower are both known for their fireworks displays. While only a lucky few get to watch the first sunrise of the New Year from Tokyo Tower, Sunshine City’s observatory opens to the public at 5:30 a.m. As you’d expect, bars and clubs in Roppongi and Shibuya also have events on for party-goers, and Tokyo Disney gets



in on the fun with a special evening of fireworks, parades, and entertainment. And although it's closed this year, Zojoji Temple is known for a lovely countdown where participants fly balloons and pray for peace. The event has come to attract more visitors than they can hold, but here's hoping that they'll find a way to make it available again!

But looking back on the pounds you've gained at *bōnenkais* (and at the long road of *shinnenkais* that lies ahead), maybe you'd like a more authentic, low-key New Year's with friends or family. Most people spend the days before the holiday cleaning their houses and preparing traditional food, so make yourself useful and see how you can lend a hand! At midnight on the 31st, Buddhist temples ring their bells an astounding 108 times, and while some brave souls may venture out to welcome the New Year this way, many stay warm and cozy in front of the TV instead. *Kōhaku Uta Gassen* (literally "red/white song battle") is a quintessential New Year's Eve activity. The most popular musicians of the year are divided into a red team (comprised of female artists) and a white team (male artists), and the two compete with special musical performances, dances, and costumes. It has been a staple of Japanese pop culture since 1951 and makes a great discussion topic when you get back to work, so be sure to check it out.

The show winds up before midnight, so you can toast the last few moments of the year any way you see fit (presuming

we've made it past the 2012 apocalypse, that is). Make sure to give everyone a big "Yoroshiku!" for the next year before heading off to bed. You'll be starting bright and early with *otoso*, a medicinal spiced *sake*. Some people may find it tough to stomach first thing in the morning, but it's supposed to ward off sickness for the rest of the year. Just think of the money you'll save on masks and tissues!

The next day, people who have indulged in a little too much non-medicinal *sake* tend to recover in front of the TV. The long-distance *ekiden* races held during the holidays are particularly popular. The New Year's Ekiden is a 100 km race held in Gunma, and the competitors are corporate teams. The Hakone Ekiden, at 217.9 km, is broadcast over the next two days and the runners are university teams. They run from Otemachi to Hakone and back again, so people living along the route can go out and cheer them on. You can also sit at home, picking over the *osechi* dishes and searching for people you know in the crowds on TV.

If you do venture out, be sure to make your first shrine visit of the year (*hatsumōde*) so you can make wishes and buy charms. Meiji Jingu and Narita-san are popular spots, so plan for long lines. This is one of the few times that men wear *kimono*, so it's a rare spectacle for those watching. And while museums may be closed, January 2nd is a chance to see the Emperor and other members of the Imperial Family address the public. This only happens two days a year (the other is the Emperor's birthday, December 23rd), so although there are several appearances scheduled for the day, be prepared for big crowds.

Spending holidays away from home can be a daunting experience, but Tokyo is a great city with great people and many different things to offer. Take advantage of these opportunities and find the best way to celebrate! I hope that your holidays and the New Year are filled with happiness.

Rachel is a former Fukushima ALT who now works in translation in Tokyo. She can often be found reading or clinging to walls but (despite persistent rumors to the contrary) is definitely not Spiderman. This is her first article for Connect.

OITA AJET'S CHARITY TOUR DE KYUSHU

Rhianna Aaron



"One of the best memories I made in Japan... do it!" – Andrei Neagoie, Oita JET

"It was so much fun last year how could I not come back?" – Angela Southee, Saga JET

"I participated in this cycling event last year and it was a blast! The weather was perfect and the cycling route was fun and safe." – Edward Pickering, Kagoshima JET

Oita AJET invites you to participate in the **16th Annual Oita AJET Charity Bike Ride!** Last year, with more than 50 riders and volunteers, we raised approximately ¥500,000 for charity. We have set an ambitious fundraising goal of ¥600,000 for this year, but, with your help, we know we can do it!

What is the Oita AJET Charity Bike Ride?

It's an opportunity to see the beautiful countryside of Kyushu, particularly in Oita Prefecture, and to meet people from all over Japan and abroad who enjoy riding bikes or volunteering. All participants are united in their goal of raising funds for charity.

When is the event?

The ride is on March 16th and 17th, 2013, but the deadline to register for the event is January 15, 2013.

Where will the funds be donated this year?

We are supporting Foundation 18 Indonesia, a small non-profit organization that runs a self-supported orphanage and educational outreach program. Their hope is that all of the children in their program will be confident, self-sufficient and full of hope for the future. Our donations will provide immunizations and will support education to at least the senior high school level. More information on Foundation 18 Indonesia can be found here: <http://foundation18.org/>

Where is the route/accommodation for the ride?

The bike ride will begin in Tsukumi City, an area known for its succulent tuna and delicious tangerines. We'll continue along Oita Prefecture's beautiful coastline through Saiki City and then head slightly inland entering into Miyazaki Prefecture. Our final destination is Sumie Family Beach Resort in Nobeoka City where we will spend the night in well-appointed cabins. The next morning, we'll return along the same route with an optional course for experienced bikers. The route is a little less than 100km each way and is relatively flat, considering the landscape of Kyushu. A detailed preview of the map can be found here: <http://www.mapmyride.com/routes/view/136177089?>

Who can participate?

Participation is open to anyone interested in helping those less fortunate, but riders must be 20 years or older. We are specifically looking for riders preferably with their own bikes, volunteers with or without a car, and anyone else able to assist us reach our fundraising goal.

How much does it cost to participate?

A ¥20,000 participation fee covers you for one night's accommodation, dinner, breakfast, snack packs, water, and a fantastic event t-shirt! The cost also includes a minimum donation of ¥10,000 that will go directly to Foundation 18 Indonesia. You are free to collect your fee in any way that suits you, but each participant needs to turn in at least ¥20,000 on the day of the ride or before. And as always, exceeding our fundraising goal is encouraged!

Please join the "16th Annual Oita AJET Charity Bike Ride" Facebook group (<http://www.facebook.com/events/385313528213448/?fref=ts>) or send an email to oita@ajet.net for more information.

Rhianna is a 4th-year ALT living in Oita Prefecture. Originally from San Francisco, California she's enjoying the slow-paced life of her inaka placement in Tsukumi City, and finds time for ballroom dancing, taiko, and singing with her girl group, Kakure Pony.





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THE CULT OF WACKO MARIA

Josiah David

27
FASHION



It could be any day of the week and any time of night past ten-thirty when the doors to a well-known underground watering hole in Kofu open and the *Guilty Party* saunters in. They head to whatever table's open and are immediately immersed in billowing clouds of cigarette smoke and instantaneous calamity for their afterhours shenanigans. They're all wearing cleverly disguised erotic imagery on their scarves, fedoras in every material and size, and their signature brand of Wacko Maria—the producer of the *Guilty Parties* line of clothing and accessories.

Their leader, proprietor of Kofu men's fashion boutique *Irie* is named Shinsuke Mizoi. Under the age of thirty, he already operates successfully with an unwaveringly loyal clientele. What makes this 3-piece-suit street gang so iconic is the audacity, the opulence and vulgarity of their prohibitively expensive looks. Mizoi is often spotted in a suit fitted the house-down, glistening tuxedo shoes and full-on fashion *pimp* with luxe patent leather gloves making the way he puffs at his cigarette exude the aura of a young Lagerfeld. Not a stitch out of place, not a stray hair to be found.

As big fishes in a small pond, I've known Mizoi for about a year now and I often engage him in discussion on his various looks—mostly to give him a razzing about the jaw-dropping prices. A mutual friend of ours for example, at one point threw down about 90,000 yen on an all-leopard print suit from Mizoi's store. While that suit seldom sees the light

of day, it provides the owner with a feeling of possessing some forward-thinking high fashion that makes the rest of us question the boundaries of our own sensibility. In fact, Wacko Maria has produced an all-leopard print collection using scarves, handbags, vests and the piece-de-resistance, the suit. In last month's article Annabella Massey noted the effective usage of animal prints as accent pieces that aren't overwhelming. In this case, it makes perfect sense to make a suit from the most garish material and sell it for a small fortune because it elevates everyday clothing to a status of *art-wear* and acts as a transgression on conventional luxury attire—Isabella Blow would be getting her life from that look. All of the clothing in his store, for that matter, usually establishes itself as *art-wear*. Don't be scared though, there are dozens of pieces for more conservative sensibilities. For as much as Mizoi's posse appears bold and fashionable, they're also known for their sultry and mysterious wallflower looks as well.

Speaking of his downtown-boutique, just off the main strip and on the fringes of the Red Light district, it's a piece of art in itself. Just a block down the street, a Comme Des Garçons shop is one third the size and designed with a fraction of the taste. Rei Kawakubo, eat your heart out. See for yourself:





What makes the store really quite special is the immaculate harmony of Japanese aesthetics represented through architecture and décor. The clientele at *Irie* believe in not just looking on point, but living a life of luxury even if it's just drinking tap water before bed. The clean lines

and minimalist motifs in the store layout produce a feeling of modernity, complimented by generations-old furniture as art installations.

Of course the last fixture that makes this store so iconic is the clients and the employees themselves. There's always a small crowd at the store, endearing new tributes into the cult of Wacko Maria.

I had a few questions for Mizoi about his store, his clients, and what's hot this winter.

Tell me about the store.

We opened in September of 2011. I opened the store because I really wanted to give Kofu a nationally-recognized *select shop*. Also, I had absolute confidence in the success of the store, so why not?

Tell me about your clients.

Fashionistas, people on the cutting edge. Also just people who like the way the clothes look.

What kind of aesthetic does your store promote?

Everyone can find something here. We don't have sales *at all*—you pay for high quality. Our staff will explain each and every article of clothing to you in great detail.

What is your "signature brand"?

In general, I only sell the one brand of clothing. I have a single-concept distribution contract. In other words, I get the monopoly on [Guilty Parties] in this city.

Where can people find Guilty Parties (WACKOMARIA) clothing?

Of course you can buy it in Tokyo.

Lastly, what is your recommendation for winter shopping?

Right now, my recommendation for this season would be a nice down vest, and of course a *Chesterfield Jacket*.

Wacko Maria was founded by retired soccer players Kenji Ishizuka and Atsuhiko Mori. Their trademark "GUILTY PARTIES" printed on almost everything they produce is telling of their style philosophy—a love for casual objectification of the female body, abhorrently large couture hats, alcohol and desert-dry humor.

They produced a three-piece collection for Fall/Winter 2012 sold exclusively in Shinjuku's Isetan department store available only for a week this past November. This included popular pieces found throughout their line; their iconic tea scarf, denim shirt, and printed tee. In previous collections,

like Spring/Summer 2012 titled "Fuck This Life", customers left with their purchases in a phantasmagoria of nude female imagery on translucent plastic totes. Included in their previous collection was a matching top and bottom Hawaiian shirt with board shorts, completely covered in a periwinkle blue print to represent sky-and-sea and decorated from top to bottom in 1950's pin-up beach babes. This season however, the tone is much simpler. Fur-lined collars with a muted monochromatic colour palette and large, American-inspired star prints in black, blue and white.



Check out Mizoi's Facebook page and blog for more images of the store and his recommendations from his in-store collection at: <http://www.facebook.com/irie.kofu.SELECTSHOP>

Check out Google for more information, photographs, and other media on Wacko Maria—destined to be enshrined as a great Japanese fashion brand.



STRONG STYLE: FLIGHT CLOTHES

Kathryn Strong

There's no place like home for the holidays. For most of us, going home means a commute to the airport, long immigration and security lines, and a trans-oceanic flight. What we wear for this trial is likely to be the least of our concerns. However, in recent years, it has become nearly impossible for a celebrity to walk through an airport without their sartorial choices being commented on. While this may be the price of fame, we can learn something from these well-dressed individuals: what you wear when flying matters.

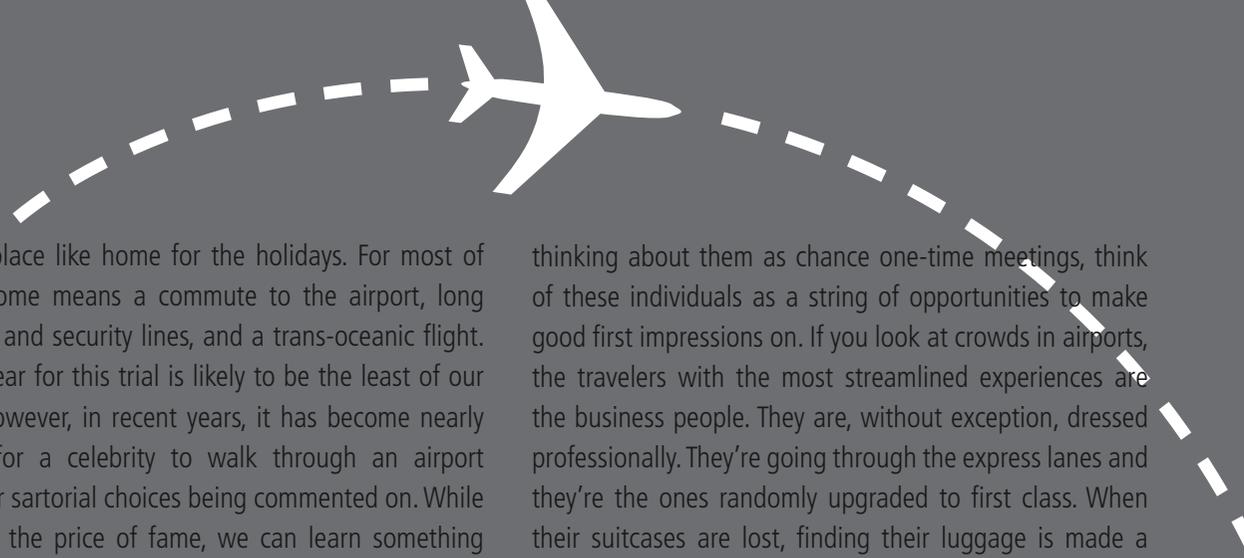
When picking out your airport outfit, the ease or difficulty of packing should come into play. Need a winter coat that won't fit in your suitcase? Wear it! Those knee-high boots you love that you don't want to smash? Put them on your feet! A hat to protect your eyes that won't hold up in your duffle bag? That goes on your head! In deciding what to wear, first figure out what you want to pack and then shop that list. Take the items that will be most difficult to fit in your suitcase and plan to wear them on the plane. You can then build an outfit around those key pieces.

Obviously, when we get dressed, we always put a little bit of thought into how we look. However, when we travel, it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that you'll never see any of your fellow passengers again and therefore your appearance doesn't matter. This isn't the case at all! First, you're going to be seeing whoever picks you up at the airport and that should be reason enough to try and look nice. More importantly, though, you're going to be interacting with tons of people on your journey. Instead of

thinking about them as chance one-time meetings, think of these individuals as a string of opportunities to make good first impressions on. If you look at crowds in airports, the travelers with the most streamlined experiences are the business people. They are, without exception, dressed professionally. They're going through the express lanes and they're the ones randomly upgraded to first class. When their suitcases are lost, finding their luggage is made a priority. Fashion is aspirational; when you travel, that's the group you should aspire to blend in with. While I would never suggest wearing a suit for a flight (and if you look around, very few business-types will), wearing clean, tailored clothing rather than sweat pants and a baggy t-shirt will help make you a more appealing customer to the airline and airport staff. That can go a long way towards making your flight a pleasant one.

Most importantly, dress for comfort. Flights are long, torturous events and you don't want to spend it wishing you wore something else. Wear layers so you can adjust to the cabin temperature. Soft, natural fabrics with a bit of stretch blended in will shape comfortably to your body. Dark colors will be forgiving in case of any spills. Whatever you choose, make sure that it's something you can wear for hours and that it'll be suitable for the weather you'll arrive in. And, most importantly, have a great winter holiday!

Kathryn is a 2nd year ALT in beautiful Okinawa. Life on her island has led to her developing an acute fear of winter and the opinion that the phrase "formal bikini" is not necessarily an oxymoron.



THE SEAWEED MEANS HAPPINESS: UNDERSTANDING OSECHI RYORI

Xan Wetherall

Set the scene: you just stumbled into your local 7-Eleven convenience store on a cold December's eve, hungry for some rice balls, instant noodles, or just one of those steamed buns you love, when your eyes are assaulted by posters and flyers galore. About half of them seem to feature confectionary delights made of strawberries and cream, crawling with tiny, photoshopped AKB48 group members, but the other half are advertising... wait, what *are* they advertising? Some kind of elegant, Japanese-style boxed lunch set, with seaweed rolls, fried egg, randomly protruding shrimps, and is that a *lobster* in the middle? All for the low, low price of roughly... 300 dollars American?! You boggle at the advertisement, and pick up an identically-festooned pamphlet from a stack, purely to take it home and photograph it for your "weird Japan stuff" collection, but you can't help but wonder: what exactly *is* this?

Welcome to the mysterious world of *osechi ryori*, or Japanese New Year's cuisine. To better understand this traditional nosh, it's important to know why this holiday is such a big deal in the first place -- in Japan, it's about a lot more than counting down and blasting off a firework or ten. For starters, the two big December holidays reverse in importance -- while Christmas is a little-thought-of occasion, mostly a time for couples to go on romantic dates, children to indulge in the proud tradition of commercialism, and undergrads to party, the New Year's holidays (effectively from the eve of December 31st until January 3rd) is a very special time, which one is expected to spend with the family, ringing in the New Year, relaxing, and of course, eating! The real origin of *osechi*, however, can be found in the Heian Period of Japan, from 794 to 1185 CE. The beginning of each New Year was thought to be when *Toshigami*, the god of grains and the harvest, would visit each home, granting families protection and prosperity. To purify their bodies and homes in preparation for his blessings, households would scrub the house and decorations spic and span, and prepare copious amounts of food prior to the three days of rest, so they had time to take a break and pray during the coming sacred days.

In fact, cooking and cleaning were highly frowned upon during this short span of days, a taboo insult that risked undoing all the work of preparation for *Toshigami*, with heating *ozoni*, or the ricecake vegetable soup eaten with *osechi*, being the only allowable exception. As a result, the foods that were made were long-lasting, being either preserved or cooked items with strong seasonings and flavors that wouldn't lose their savor, or go bad in the short stretch. While most typical Japanese families these days won't hesitate to cook up some rice or clean the bathroom during the holiday, they do seem to keep the trend of *osechi* rolling along: a 2002 survey from food manufacturer Kibun Foods Inc. showed that a staggering 97.4% of Japanese households still eat *osechi* every year.

Osechi ryori can generally be identified from the outset by its unique *jubako*, or stacking black lacquer boxes. Depending on the size of the family, the time, and money someone is willing to sink into the offerings, there can be anywhere from one to five layers, although the "typical" number is three. In this generic set, the first layer, the *ichi no ju*, usually contains snacks, the second, *ni no ju*, appetizers, and the third, *san no ju*, the heartier aspects of the meal. Although the foods contained within the layers themselves can differ from region to region, and family to family, they all tend to carry the same symbolic association of good health, good harvest, and family prosperity. Even the chopsticks you eat your *osechi* with might be different than usual: tapered at both ends, so that you can use one end to eat, while the visiting god *Toshigami* uses the other!

Some commonly found *osechi ryori* cuisine, and their festive significance:

- ◆ *Kuromame*, sweet boiled black soybeans, are one of the most common New Year's offerings. The *mame* of *kuromame* means "bean", but is also a homonym in Japanese, referring to the saying *mamemameshiku hataraku*, or "work diligently". Eating them is

supposed to increase your diligence in the workplace, and encourage good health and vitality.

- ◆ *Tazukuri*, sweet dried sardines, literally translates into “making ricefields”, and represents wishes for a bountiful harvest in the coming year.
- ◆ *Kurikinton*, mashed sweet potato and sweet chestnuts, symbolizes wealth, due to its beautiful gold hue, one of the lucky New Year colors. In *osechi*, most anything gold or silver-colored, such as rolled omelet varieties (*datemaki* and *nishiki tamagoyaki*) is symbolic of good monetary fortune in the coming year.
- ◆ *Kazunoko*, herring roe, is significant for its thousands of tiny eggs in a single group. Generally seasoned with soy sauce, they (along with any other kind of fish roe in the box) are a symbol of procreativity, and fertility, and are especially popular with those seeking to start a family!
- ◆ *Kohaku namasu*, red and white vinegared daikon and carrot, representing the auspicious colors of the New Year for happiness and celebration. The colors red and white are a strong theme throughout all of the New Year’s decorations in Japan, as it is said to represent the rising sun in the sky during the morning of New Year’s Day.
- ◆ *Konbumaki*, kombu seaweed rollup, usually filled with a type of fish, like salmon, or herring. The *konbu* of *konbumaki* sounds like *yorokobu*, which means delight, or happiness, a favorable element for your new year!
- ◆ *Subasu*, vinegared lotus root. As the holes of the lotus root are numerous, and easy to see through, it is said that you can catch a glimpse of a trouble-free future when you look through them!
- ◆ Grilled or broiled *tai*, sea bream. The word *tai* is also

inside the term *omedetai*, or “congratulations”, so the fish is often eaten at celebratory events, like birthdays, company parties, or weddings.

- ◆ *Ebi*, or shrimp, are actually symbolic of long life! Why? Their bent backs and long “beards” make them look like little old men, representing longevity and good health!
- ◆ *Nimono*, boiled things, primarily vegetables, such as *gobou* burdock root, and *satouimo*, taro. All the vegetables being cooked together is symbolic of families with many different elements getting along for another year! Additionally, eating burdock root is said to encourage a good, firm foundation for the family, while eating taro is yet another fertility symbol, as taro roots are often pulled up with endless tiny taros attached to them!

So where, as they say, is the beef? What’s the reason for that exorbitant price tag? While truly run-of-the-mill *osechi* is extremely symbolic, the ingredients don’t have to be all that expensive, or fancy. However, the expensive sets you see advertised in convenience stores are usually either produced by famous chefs and restaurants, use premium, expensive ingredients (such as abalone and lobster), or both. Additionally, the cost tends to factor in how deeply time-consuming it is to make these elaborate sets, and how much time *you’ll* be saving by buying them instead.

Set the scene: you let it slip to one of your coworkers that you’d be in Japan over New Year’s, and no, you had to admit, you’d never had a “Japanese New Year’s experience” before. So now here you are, sometime around midday on January 1st, snuggled under the *kotatsu* with what appears to be the entirety of her extended family. After a freezing early morning wakeup call to watch the sun rise, followed by a visit to the local shrine for a few seconds of prayer, and an hour or so of amulet buying, you’re starving. Famished. Just then, her wizened grandmother carefully opens up

the *jubako*, and begins arranging it in front of you on the table. “Look,” your coworker says excitedly, gesturing to something in the *ichi no ju*, “do you know what this is?” The whole family turns as one to look at you. You smile confidently. As a matter of fact, you *do*.

Xan is a third-year Fukushima ALT with, like, five kitchen knives, approximately one of which actually cuts things. In the free time that she doesn’t spend eating anything within hand’s reach, she enjoys balcony gardening, fruit beers, and making really awful Japanese puns on her own name, I mean, really bad.



HOLIDAY GATHERINGS AND TASTY TORTES

Ariane Bobiash

December and January are typically months chock-full of gluttonous social gatherings, and what better time than the cold winter season to indulge in good food with good friends? And with schools in Japan lacking insulation, why not bolster our own?

Two of my favorite holiday food gatherings are cookie exchanges and cookie decorating parties. A cookie exchange, if you've never heard of one, is pretty self-explanatory: every guest brings a different batch of cookies to someone's house, where they are separated in a way that everyone can take home a few of each. For decorating parties, some people should volunteer to bake gingerbread or sugar cookies and the rest should bring decorations such as frosting and sprinkles, or warm holiday drinks to sip on throughout the affair. (A quick note about ingredients: most gingerbread recipes call for molasses. This could be ordered online, or you could try using the Japanese version: *kuro mitsu*. This 'black honey' is not actually honey, but a type of molasses made from black sugar).

Read on for a tasty torte recipe from Yamagata JET Rebecca Douglas!

Fruited Brazil Nut Loaf

For as long as I can remember, in anticipation of the holidays my dad has taken over the kitchen to take part in his baking event of the year, a famous Christmas loaf. The recipe first appeared in the Christmas Edition of *Canadian Living* in the early 90s, and has been a Christmas mainstay in my family ever since. Now you may be thinking 'yet another Christmas fruitcake recipe- that often dry and fruitless filler on a Christmas platter, looking sad between the buttery shortbread and crispy gingersnaps'. But don't fret! Because it is loaded with dried fruits, it remains moist and delicious! This loaf offers a perfect traditional treat to share with your fellow teachers, neighbors, and Japanese friends who are always excited about western Christmas

customs. All ingredients for the cake are available in various international stores across Japan. So throw on the Christmas tunes, tie up your Rudolph apron and get your holiday baking on!

Ingredients:

- 1 ½ cups dried figs
- 1 ½ cups dried apricots
- 1 cup candied pineapple
- ½ cup candied cherries
- ½ cup chopped preserved ginger
- 3 cups whole shelled Brazil nuts
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1 tsp baking powder
- 4 eggs
- 1 tsp vanilla



1. Line two 8 x 4" (1.5 l) loaf pans with foil; grease well and set aside (smaller sizes may be used)
2. Pour boiling water over figs and apricots; let stand for 5 minutes. Drain and chop into large pieces. Cut pineapple into chunks. Halve cherries.
3. In large bowl, mix together figs, apricots, pineapple, cherries, ginger and Brazil nuts. Stir together flour, sugar and baking powder; add to fruit mixture and toss to mix.
4. In separate bowl, beat eggs well; stir in vanilla. Add to fruit mixture and mix well; spoon into prepared pans. Bake at 180 degree C for 1 hour or until cake tester inserted into centre comes out clean.
5. Let cool for 10 minutes; remove from pans and let cool completely on racks. Loaves can be wrapped and refrigerated for up to 2 weeks.



SNOWSPORTS: NISEKO OVER WINTER

Andy Telfer

Kawabata Yasunari's Noble prize winning novel 雪国—or 'Snow Country'—perhaps best describes the greatest features of the Japanese Winter. Host to Winter Olympics, international snow sculpture competitions and world class snowboarding, nowhere else is quite the epitome of 'snow country' than Hokkaido.

However, the benefits of winter are not limited to snow; head north to enjoy the local cuisine, share your *onsen* with monkeys, take in some snow sculptures *and* snowboard... all before ending your day in front of a roaring fire—in an insulated building!

Getting Yourself There

If heading directly to the slopes **from Chitose Airport**, I recommend taking the bus. The journey takes around 3 hours, costs ¥3,850 and requires reservation. Before booking, check with your accommodation as some places may arrange transport to the resort at a discounted rate and pick-ups from the bus stop at Grand Hirafu tourist office. Bus companies also offer transport and lift pass combos for as little as ¥4900. <http://www.niseko.ne.jp/en/lift/index.html>

From Sapporo choose between the bus and train. If traveling by train, JR offers combo tickets which include transport and lift passes but you will need to find your own transport from the station to the slope.

Getting Your Gear There

Got your own board or skis? Why be burdened with equipment when you can let the good folk at *Kuroneko Yamato* do the heavy lifting for you! It's a great way to avoid lugging your bulky gear with you as you travel. Simply take your equipment to any *combin*i featuring the black cat logo, or call them to come collect your things (at least 2/3 days before departure), and you shall find it patiently awaiting you at your Hokkaido home. Costs vary according to your distance from the slopes: <http://www.kuronekoyamato.co.jp/en/personal/ski/>

If renting gear, there are numerous shops around the Grand Hirafu area in which to do so. Friends have frequently used the sports store adjacent to the Downtown Café, located at the end of the resort's main street.

Niseko

The area commonly referred to as Niseko houses the four resorts of Hanazono, Niseko Village Higashiyama, Annupuri and Niseko Grand Hirafu. All can be accessed with an all-mountain pass giving you usage of 3 gondolas and 35 lifts.

Niseko offers a range of slopes to challenge all levels, not only advanced boarders and skiers. From the top of the mountain you have access to all runs as well as some serious off-piste action, whereas the bunny slope at Grand Hirafu offers a wide and picturesque location for those taking their initial steps into either sport.

Grand Hirafu makes up the majority of the resort and is easily able to amuse those looking to pay for just one resort. Hanazono is the destination for those looking to get more aerial with numerous jumps, rails and boxes, while both Niseko Village Higashiyama and Annupuri provide more relaxed and less congested environments to enjoy the snow.

Niseko Food and Drink

Niseko is incredibly foreigner friendly. The locals are exceptionally kind and are greatly entertained at even the most rudimentary use of Japanese. Also, the staff in most restaurants, bars and shops are able to use English, or are actually foreigners themselves. Menus, signs and prices are generally bilingual.

It's sometimes easy to forget where you are with the wide variety of foreign food on offer, the constant English music being blared out and the onslaught of Australian accents in every bar, shop and chair lift queue! Perhaps the biggest difference of all is that indoor areas operate non-smoking policies with smokers confined outdoors! Brrrr.

In town you can do no better than treating yourself to a pizza from *Niseko Pizza*. These pizza stalwarts veer away from the likes of tuna and corn to offer more traditional western toppings in their new, stylish location. There are also numerous food trucks offering international fare. If you're looking for somewhere less international, or more off the beaten path, just seek out the scents, and smoke, which are hopefully an indicator of warm hospitality more so than calamity!

For drinks, Niseko, as with all places frequented by foreigners, is host to the obligatory Irish bar, serving Guinness and showing sports. The ice bars are an enjoyable novelty, constructed entirely of ice and serving both soft drinks and alcohol in ice cups.

Onsen

Japanese *après-ski* does away with the need for *vin* and *chocolat chaud* with an abundance of *onsen* to heat and heal after a hard day on the piste. They offer a chance for recuperation and some of the best views of Mt. Yotei and Niseko! Using the ¥1400 'Yumeguri Pass', available at the train station or Niseko View Plaza, you can access up to three *onsen*. It's highly recommended if you're staying for a few days.

Accommodation

Prices vary greatly and can be costly during peak season. I recommend staying as close to Grand Hirafu as possible although many lodges will drive you for first lifts if you are able to get yourself out of bed. I can personally recommend the North Field Lodge for those willing to spend a little more, while those on a budget will be satisfied with Koroppokuru Lodge.

Night boarding

Not content with just boarding during the day? Need a lie-in after the day before? Niseko offers outstanding conditions during the day but arguably exceeds them after dark. Open from 16:30 - 20:30, the floodlit slopes of Grand

Hirafu are far less crowded, feature increased visibility and bring new challenges to even the most well-trodden of slopes. However, please note that this is when those who work all day come out to play—and they often do so at reckless speeds!

Ain't no sunshine when she's snowin'

If you are accustomed to snow-sports in the Easter sun, Niseko is going to prove a bit of a shock. The greatest plus for Niseko can also be its downfall. In order to create its famed powder snow, it has to snow a lot. In a perfect world it would dump down during the night and we would awake to blue skies, but the truth is that visibility can be an issue the higher you ascend. However, the snow quality more than makes up for this; if you find yourself out on a clear day you are in for a treat. At all other times balaclavas and orange or yellow tinted lenses are a must.

In dire times I recommend retreating to the Downtown Café for a *char-siu* burger, coffee and board games to wile away the hours until the floodlights come on.

Sapporo Snow Festival

If keen to see snow, and pass on the *piste*, why not visit Sapporo City's Snow Festival. The 64th festival will be held from 5th – 11th February 2013 in Odori Park and the surrounding Susukino district. Famous landmarks, animals, characters and celebrities are *all* sculpted from snow for you to admire as you saunter around the park. This is also a great opportunity to indulge in some ramen, hot wine and other festival food served upon ice bar-tops.

Hokkaido Food and Drink

Hokkaido serves up spectacular seafood. Famed hairy crab can be found at '*Ebi Kani Gassen*' in Sapporo. Their *tabe/nomihoudai* of crab, shrimp and tempura is definitely worth the coinage.

Hokkaido ramen shies away from *tonkotsu*, but the Northerners consume their ramen in *shio* (salt), *miso*

and butter varieties; each delicious and meriting a try.

Scarce elsewhere in Japan, Hokkaido is also full of lamb, generally sold under the guise of '*jingisukan*', or Genghis Khan *tabehoudai* deals. It is a perfect opportunity for lamb lovers to make up for lost time!

Omiyage

Thankfully Hokkaido has souvenir shopping covered with seafood, cheese, the infamous *shiroi koibito* and Royce's chocolate covered crisps, so save a moment and some money for travel treats before heading home!

Andy is a 5th Year Kitakyushu City JET counting down the days until winter comes.

Niseko Free Passport:
http://www.igluski.com/japan/niseko-piste-map_25893

Niseko Free Passport Map



COOL RUNNING: CHASING THE RISING SUN

Timothy White



Upcoming marathons in 2013

Ibusuki Nanohana Marathon (Ibusuki, Kagoshima) - 13th January
Katsuta Marathon (Hitachinaka, Ibaraki) - 27th January
Beppu Oita Mainichi Marathon (Oita) - 3rd February
Tokyo Marathon - 24th February
Nagano Olympic Marathon - 15th April
Hokkaido Marathon (Sapporo) - 26th August
Osaka Yodogawa City Marathon - 4th November
Fukuchiyama Marathon (Kyoto) - 23rd November
Naha Okinawa Marathon - 2nd December

My running history consists of two full and two half marathons. I can't say I was always a runner or that I had trained much; in high school the most running I did was warm-up laps and condition training for sports. It was years later that I developed a love for running and worked towards my first marathon. I'm now working towards the Ibusuki Nanohana, Nagano Olympic and Aotai Pacific marathons next year, with the ultimate goal being to reach the finish lines!

If a marathon tests anything, it's one's endurance and determination to finish the 26.2 miles, or 42.195 kilometers. In 2002 I ran my first Japanese marathon in Naha, Okinawa. I was serving in the United States Marine Corp and was volunteered for it. Training was not too hard as we were running an average of twelve miles a week anyway. Endurance wasn't an issue either but it still put me to the test. Controlling my pace and holding a steady speed was difficult; I tended to start at a high pace, making it tougher to finish. For my second marathon, in 2007 in Miami Florida, stamina was an issue. I also did one half marathon in North Carolina, before leaving the Marines, and another in Tennessee in 2010, for the Music City Run.

Are you ready for a marathon? Why do you want to do it? They're questions you should definitely ask yourself. The key is staying motivated and wanting to do it. Remember that after you finish you will join the one percent of people in the world who have completed this kind of challenge!

I've been working on my marathon training since I jetted to Japan this year. I've broken my training schedule into a six week period before running a marathon. Sixteen weeks would be ideal, but if you have done some pre-training and can run

five miles, or thirty minutes straight, without problems, then this six week plan may work well for you, too.

Each week should have four days of running with three off to rest - always rest between days. Rest is vital as running back to back will only cause injury. Week one should begin slowly with a distance starting at three to six miles with one day per week reserved for one long run, at six to ten miles. Increase the distances each week and by week five you should be at five to eight mile runs and your long run at twenty miles. For the sixth week, halve the distances and have one day for walking about three miles. Still do a long run at the end but it should taper down to about eight to ten miles.

So, if you're ready to train...

- ◆ Tune In: Choose your training music – it's a challenge in itself!
- ◆ Happy Feet: Your feet are everything; take care of them and get a good pair of running shoes.
- ◆ Durable Diet: Eat plenty of carbohydrates and protein for fuel and strength.
- ◆ Hydration Station: Rehydrate after runs with water and sports drinks. If you feel thirsty you're possibly dehydrated and need to continuously drink more fluids.
- ◆ R&R: Rest properly so your body can recover and avoid injury.

I hope you're inspired and will challenge yourself. Training will be tough, but reaching that goal will make you feel whole: like a whole new person.

Watch out for Kagoshima JET Tim White as he runs from southern Satsuma to Shinshu, and beyond, in search of the rising sun—and most likely new soles, too.

EXPLORING EBISU

By Elysse Hurtado

One of my favorite areas of Tokyo to visit on a day off is Ebisu. Right on the Yamanote line, only one stop from Shibuya, Ebisu is easily accessible and within walking distance of other, more visited areas. With an atmosphere somewhere between Aoyama and Harajuku, Ebisu is known for its relatively upscale quality while still being reasonably priced. Small boutiques and art galleries are scattered throughout the streets, and there are a whole host of eateries offering a variety of cuisines.



Amongst all this, the best-known attraction is Ebisu Garden Place. Paved with red bricks in a European style, the plaza covers quite a large space for Tokyo; on the west side it follows the road, lined with stately oaks that provide welcome shade in the summer and is dotted with nostalgic wooden park benches. The centerpiece of this open area is an art sculpture that may look familiar to fans of Japanese television shows: this abstract stone piece has often been featured in dramas, and is as much a meeting place as Hachiko is in Shibuya.



The rest of the upper area is populated with skyscrapers and cafes, many of them with terraces or patios. One of the buildings even has a European-style clock inside which plays music and sends out marionettes on the hour. There are also chain stores such as Mitsukoshi or Baskin Robbins and a wide ramping terrace that flows down to the lower levels underneath the giant awning, complete with benches and landscaping. As a fun side-note, if you look around the top ledge of the huge glass and girder roof, you can try counting all of the large plastic owls set at regular intervals to scare off pigeons.

Ebisu Garden Place also houses some

attractions of its own. In addition to a movie theater, there are rooftop gardens and terraces from which you can get an eyeful of the glittering splendor of night-time Tokyo. And I would be amiss if I didn't mention the area's namesake, Ebisu Beer. There is a commemorative hall on the bottom of the terrace where you can go on guided tours to learn about how Ebisu Beer is made, followed by a taste-testing period, or you can go straight to the taste-testing salon and drink your fill.

Finally, what always draws me back to Ebisu is the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography. With four floors this gallery hosts multiple collections at all times, covering subjects from the origins of photography to the avant-garde work of Moriyma Daido and everything in between. If you are looking for a part of Tokyo with a slower pace and a breath of fresh air, you might just want to give Ebisu a try.

Elysse Hurtado is a second year CIR living in Ibaraki, where she fills all her free time with books, writing and cooking. Current projects include teaching herself Chinese, crocheting a stuffed animal, and travelling as much as possible. Elysse misses having a social life very, very much. You can visit her blog at <http://wanderingbluesky.wordpress.com/>.



13 HOT DESTINATIONS FOR 2013

Amelia Hagen



With every travel mag recommending destinations for 2013, how can you possibly choose your next jaunt? Here's our spin on where to *jet* off to this coming year!

1. Croatia—Famous for its picturesque coastlines and crystal, Dubrovnik will be hosting the Association of British Travel Agents' 2013 travel convention. I think it's a big hint!

2. Myanmar—Political progress continues in Myanmar and its friendly people are unrivaled. Aung San Suu Kyi is free from house arrest and Barack Obama just made a historic visit. Why not you, too?

3. Namibia—While South Africa is an easy choice, Connect has flipped, turned upside down and chosen Namibia as its can't-miss African destination of 2013. It's also hosting the 2013 Adventure Travel World Summit!

4. Puerto Rico—Technically a U.S. territory, Puerto Rico may soon be America's 51st state after over 60% of its citizens voted in favor of U.S. statehood. The forts of San Juan and Bioluminescent Bay are calling your name.

5. Sri Lanka—Featuring a combination of undeveloped, scenic beaches, a long list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the center of the island and a best value reputation, Sri Lanka is growing as a tourism destination every day. You can even volunteer at elephant orphanages!

6. Morocco—A location between mainland Europe and the rest of Africa makes Morocco a top destination of 2013. There's always *Casablanca* but don't forget Fez and Marrakech. Make Marrakech your base when planning Sahara treks and remember to indulge in the traditional *hammam* steam baths.

7. Iceland—With the release of *Skyfall*, the latest 007 film, travel buffs are jet-setting to destinations featured in the movie. While Nagasaki's Gunkanjima was the basis for the *Skyfall* villain's lair, Iceland was home to the ice ball in

Die Another Day. Oh, and Iceland has Blue Lagoon, shark meat, geysers, and breathtaking national parks, too.

8. New Zealand—Similar to South Africa, it's painstakingly difficult to leave New Zealand off any travel hot spot list. Yes, sheep outnumber people, but the *Lord of the Rings* scenery, glaciers, adrenaline sports, Christchurch's earthquake recovery, Rotorua spas, the Queenstown social scene, the Southern Alps, and the Coromandel Peninsula beckon.

10. Bolivia—Known as the 'Tibet of the Americas', Bolivia is making a comeback in 2013 with increased access. The crown jewel is Salar de Uyuni, the world's largest salt flat. Chill on piles of salt and relax on Laguna Verde!

11. Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates—Yes, I know: you're thinking, 'Why not Dubai?' Well, why not Abu Dhabi? It boasts the world's first Ferrari theme park and is easily a day trip away from the more glitzy Dubai.

12. Switzerland—A bit more expensive than the Matterhorn ride at Disneyland but you don't need 'go all St. Moritz' to enjoy the slopes of this neutral nation. The new 'MySwitzerland' iPad application will show you exactly how to maximize your time around the Swiss Alps.

13. Nepal—Adventure travel is all the rage and Himalayan trekking simply screams adventure, doesn't it? These days, you can't scan a travel blog's home page without some mention of Nepal. Mount Everest too daunting? Try an Annapurna Base Camp (ABC) trek and complement it with a monastery stay.

Amelia Hagen is a fifth-year ALT in the home of Ayumi Hamasaki, also known as Fukuoka Prefecture. When she is not traveling to the far ends of the earth, she enjoys chodo-ing, or paying with exact change, fist-bumping Hello Kitty at Oita's Harmonyland, and searching for the next jetset bargain. Amelia is the former President of Fukuoka AJET.



KIZUNA BABY

Sophia Staite



We were chatting excitedly as we walked down the garden path to the orphanage, but an awkward silence settled as we passed the open bedroom window and saw rows of cribs, so many crammed into the room that the bars were pressed together. As we entered the room where the infants spend their days they all began to cry at this influx of odd looking strangers. I think more than one of us brand-new volunteers hesitated to cross the threshold that day. The babies hated us! We made adorable little toddlers cry! Disaster!

Fast forward just a few weeks, and the scene has changed completely. As we arrive, a little boy toddles over with his arms up-stretched, wanting to be picked up. A little girl falls asleep in my lap almost the moment she feels her body connect with mine. A month into our weekly visiting schedule and one of the older girls will plop herself down on the floor in front of us and point to the body part she wants massaged. We have formed a kizuna, a bond, with these children.

Kizuna Baby provides services to eight orphanages throughout Japan, and interested volunteers who do not

live near one of the existing programs can help Kizuna expand into their area. That is how I became involved, actually. I was looking for ways to get started with orphanage volunteering and found Kizuna’s website. At the time they were only operating in Tokyo, but enough people in Oita were motivated to participate that Les May, Kizuna’s founder, established a program here. So what is Kizuna and what do volunteers do?

Kizuna began activities in Japan in September 2010. It provides massage therapy for institutionalised children (“orphans”), massage training for orphanage staff and also for prospective foster and adoptive parents. In addition to massage, many volunteers are involved with Kizuna through translation/interpretation, administrative work and other assistance. Massage itself provides numerous health and emotional benefits for infants. During our training we learned that

“The availability of nurturing touch shapes a baby’s brain and biochemistry in lasting ways. It is one of the most important factors in determining whether or not a baby will grow into an adult who is able to cope well with stress, treat others with compassion, and form healthy long-term relationships.”¹

Massage helps babies relax and release more serotonin (the ‘happy juice’) and less adrenaline and cortisol (the stress hormones). It relieves the discomfort of colic and helps premature and low-birth-weight infants gain weight. Massaged babies even display stronger immune systems, a very important trait in a communal living-style institution.

The formation of a bond between volunteers and babies is also an important part of our work. Infants living in institutionalised care have limited opportunities to form the secure emotional attachment that is so important to their development. With each staff member caring for several children, the opportunities for one-on-one, undivided attention are limited.



At this point I should explain the inverted commas around “orphans”. In 2010, before the tsunami, there were 33,000 children living in institutional care in Japan. Most of these children are not technically orphans, but they cannot live with their birth families for various reasons including abandonment, temporary inability of the parents to care for them, or abuse. Since it is close to impossible to sever parental rights within Japan’s legal system, unless the birth family chooses to relinquish a child voluntarily, they cannot be adopted. While this may sound obvious, it applies even in cases of severe abuse and to babies who have been left in train stations or other public places. Since the parents cannot be identified and located to give consent for adoption, in many cases these babies will simply remain in an “orphanage” until they become adults. In Oita prefecture an average of only two children are adopted (by people other than their extended family members) per year. So, although we use “orphanage” to describe these facilities, please do not confuse them with what we usually mean in English by that word. At the same time, when people first learn about the Japanese system there is sometimes anger directed toward the orphanages for failing to place children into foster or adoptive families. This anger is misdirected; orphanages which exist to care for children are never run for profit, and their ability to place children in families is constrained by law. Orphanages and their staff are not responsible for the system in which they operate, and I want to reassure anyone interested in volunteering that doing so will in no way contribute to perpetuating an unfortunate situation.

In Japan, 90% of orphanages are private or semi-private, with charities rather than the government taking on the responsibility to care for displaced children. Approximately 3,000 children live in 乳児院 (nyujiin: infant nurseries, usually for children under two years old). One of the orphanages Kizuna has just begun a program in cares for babies who have brain damage as a result of being shaken. These infants are very unlikely to be adopted, and so will probably spend their entire childhoods living in

the orphanage. Like all babies, they need a lot of loving attention and skin contact. The importance of Kizuna’s activities for these children cannot be overstated.

So, how can you get started? Fortunately, Kizuna makes it very easy. Just visit the website and fill in the online application form at http://www.kizunababy.jp/Japan_orphans_apply_English.html. Kizuna staff will be in touch to let you know when the next training session in your area is, or, if there is no program in your area, you will be added to a waiting list (so it helps to encourage your friends to sign up at the same time). After you have attended a one-day training session (and in some cases had a medical check, although for JETs our annual check-up is usually sufficient) you’ll be ready for baby massage volunteer work. Just don’t be put off if the babies cry a lot at first, they will quickly come to look forward to your visits! It is an incredible privilege to witness a child’s first words, help her take her first steps or to be the first person who could solicit a giggle or a smile from a withdrawn baby. My experiences volunteering with Kizuna are some of my most treasured memories of my time in Japan, and I cannot recommend it highly enough.

(Endnotes)

1 http://www.kizunababy.jp/benefits_English.html

Sophia is a fourth year ALT in Oita Prefecture. She has devoted her time in Japan to raising awareness of the lack of folk metal offered at karaoke, and dreams to one day see Finntroll available in every Shidax nationwide.

SECOND HARVEST JAPAN

Neetha Mony

During my first year on JET, I remember trying to figure out how to explain Thanksgiving to my students and, like always, I sought out pop culture for answers. *The Simpsons*, one of my favorite shows, had a Thanksgiving episode in their second season that is often heralded as the best episode of the series. Packed with Thanksgiving traditions, the episode focused on Bart's character development when he meets two homeless men at a soup kitchen and realizes that he has many things to be thankful for. In America many people volunteer at soup kitchens, especially around Thanksgiving and Christmas, but I assumed that this concept would be difficult for my students to understand. I rarely saw homeless people and thought that Japan, being a small affluent nation, doesn't really have a problem with hunger or poverty. It wasn't until I read about Second Harvest Japan that I realized how wrong my assumptions were.

Statistics

According to The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in April 2011, Japan's poverty level was about 15%. For many reasons, about 1 in 6 Japanese people have problems paying for basic resources and housing. Second Harvest Japan estimates that more than 650,000 people in Japan don't have daily access to safe and nutritious food. The Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries stated that 5 – 9 million tons of food is thrown away every year.

Second Harvest Japan

In 2000, several Tokyo soup kitchens grouped together to form Second Harvest Japan (2HJ). The "first harvest" is when people purchase food in the commercial market. The "second harvest" is giving out the remainder of the food so it isn't wasted. Two years later 2HJ started Japan's first food bank. 2HJ's aim is for everyone to have access to healthy and nutritious food, and they accomplish this goal by "harvesting" food. This means that they search out perfectly edible food that will be thrown out and redistribute it to people who are in need. Tons of food

(literally) is wasted every year in Japan and there are many families and agencies that can use that food. All the food is donated and 2HJ doesn't pay for the food they deliver. The chart on the left is from 2HJ's website and helps illustrate how they harvest food.

Holiday Donations

For Christmas and New Years, 2HJ is collecting food donations that they will package and deliver to those who need it. The items should be unopened and unexpired. Online shopping is great for easy access and delivery. Here are the items on their holiday wish list:

1. Mochi
2. Christmas sweets
3. Spam and tuna cans
4. Oil
5. Soba
6. Mentsuyu (noodle dipping sauce)
7. Pasta
8. Cup noodles.

You can send the donations to:

Second Harvest Japan
Mizuta Building
4-5-1 Asakusabashi
Taito-ku, Tokyo 111-0053

Volunteering at 2HJ

Second Harvest Japan also has many volunteer opportunities in Tokyo throughout the year. You can look at their online calendar for available volunteer shifts.

http://www.2hj.org/index.php/eng_home/schedule.

If you are interested in volunteering as a group, first register online at https://www.2hj.org/forms/eng_volunteer_g.php.

"Judge each day not by the harvest you reap but by the seeds you plant." ~ Robert Louis Stevenson



40

VOLUNTEERING

December issue Haiku winner



Nestled in futon
Hidden from winter morning
Alarm body jumps

Sam Hall
Nagasaki City

MONTHLY HAIKU CONTEST

Got a haiku of your own you want the JET community to hear? Submit it for January-February's Haiku Competition! Contestants may submit one original haiku to contest@ajet.net. Haikus should be received by **January 25th**. The competition is open to current JET participants only. The winner will be decided by means of an online poll, with the winning haiku being published in next month's issue! Happy haiku-ing!

Welcome to AJET Connect's monthly Photography Contest! Send us your photos and battle it out with other works of art from all over Japan in the hopes of becoming the highly coveted Photo of the Month. The photo with the highest number of votes will have the honour of being featured on the cover of the next issue, as well as being entered in the annual AJET Photography Contest. Submissions are welcomed from all current JET Programme participants.

Submissions should be original, high quality JPG files. Contestants may submit one photo each month. This contest is for JET participants only. The theme for this month's competition is "The Beginning". Send your entries to contest@ajet.net. In the case that you submit photographs where people are clearly featured, you must get permission from those featured before you submit their image.

MONTHLY PHOTOGRAPHY CONTEST

As we say goodbye to 2012, and hello to 2013, the theme for December-January's competition "The Beginning"! Of course, you're free to interpret the theme however you will—think outside the box and your photo may end up at the top of our next issue!



Please submit your photos by January 25th. A shortlist will be created and you will have one week to vote for your favourite photo via online poll at www.ajet.net/photos. Voting will be open from January 26th until midnight on February 3rd.

Ownership/ Use Rights

Photographers retain the rights to their photograph. By entering the contest, photographers agree to have their submitted photograph published on the cover of AJET Connect magazine, displayed on the AJET website and posted on AJET Facebook sites. Photos will be credited to the author named in the entry form.



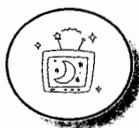
PHOTOGRAPHY WINNERS

You've already seen Zhiying Lu's amazing winning photograph of a Japanese Christmas tree on the cover of this month's issue, now take a look at the runner-up from the November Photography Competition!

If you're interested in entering December-January's Photography Competition, flip over to the next page for more details!



Katie McIntosh, Kobe **#2**



Lesson plans are the basic building blocks of any curriculum or unit plan. Thus, they are vital to the pursuit of long-term classroom goals. Understanding the purpose and process of lesson planning is an essential skill for teachers. On a fundamental level, a lesson plan helps the teacher focus his or her thoughts on what to teach and how to teach it, and break allotted class time down into manageable parts. More importantly, a well-designed lesson plan provides a clear picture of the specific learning goals for the lesson, as well as some form of assessment to measure whether or not those goals are accomplished. Put more simply, every good plan should address the questions, “What exactly do I want my students to learn?” and “What evidence do I have that tells me that the students are learning?” The answers to these two questions can then act as guideposts for developing the substance of a quality lesson.

How to Plan an Effective Lesson

Let’s take a look at the components of a good lesson plan. While lesson plans come in all shapes and sizes, the essentials are the same. The initial step in planning is to ask the first question mentioned above: “What exactly do I want my students to learn?” The answer is the learning objective for the lesson.

Learning objectives can also be called aims for instruction or learning targets. They are a vital component of any lesson plan. Objectives should be clear, focused, and measurable. What does this mean? Let’s look at an example of a poor objective:

Objective – Students will learn about the meaning of love while singing a Beatles song.

Although this may sound like an enjoyable and meaningful lesson, the objective is too vague, and most importantly, it can’t be measured. There is no way to tell with any certainty if the students are actually learning anything, especially while they are singing.

Below is an example of an objective that can be measured:

Objective – Students will be introduced to new vocabulary in the Beatles song “All You Need is Love” and practice singing as a class.

すべてのカリキュラムや単元学習において基本となるのが授業案で、クラスの長期的目標を達成するためには不可欠なものです。そのため教師には授業案の目的と作成過程を理解することが求められます。授業案の基本的な役割としては、教師が「何を」「どのように」教えるかについて真剣に考えるきっかけとなり、授業時間を扱いやすい長さのパートに区切る際の基準となることです。更に重要な点は、良くデザインされた授業案は具体的な学習目標に対する明確なイメージを与えてくれる上、その目標が達成されたかどうかを評価する手段にもなることです。つまり、良い授業案は「本当に生徒に学んで欲しいことは何なのか」「生徒が確かに学んでいるということを示す証拠があるのか」という疑問に対する答えを与えてくれます。その答えこそが質の高い授業を作るための指針となるのです。

効果的な授業案の作り方

良い授業案の要素を考えてみましょう。授業案には様々な形式と規模がありますが、本質は同じです。計画の第一歩は、先に述べた「本当に生徒に学んで欲しいことは何なのか」を自問することです。その質問に対する答えが授業における学習目標となります。

学習目標は、指導目標や学習目的と呼ぶこともありませんが、いずれにしても授業案において最も重要な要素です。目標は明確、重点的かつ測定可能でなければならぬのです。これが何を意味するのか、悪い例を取り上げて考えてみましょう。

目標—ビートルズの歌を歌い、愛の真意について学ぶ。

一見したところ楽しくて有意義な授業になると思うかもしれませんが、この目標はあまりに曖昧ですし、更に問題なのは達成度を測ることができない点です。生徒が実際に何かを学ぶことができているかを確実に知る方法が何もなく、特に歌っている様子からはまったく分かりません。

以下は目標が測定可能な良い例です。

目標—ビートルズの歌「愛こそはすべて」を通して新しい語彙を学び、クラス全員で歌う練習する。