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CONNECT

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear readers,

I hope everyone is dealing well with the sweltering heat which August brought. Every year I seem to forget what it feels like to have full-body sweat at 8am. . . . Who knew I could sweat this much just sitting down? How could I ever forget this terrible sensation brought to you by Japanese humidity. . .

With the second wave of COVID, most international residents have had to rearrange their summer vacation plans for something a little more local or more socially distanced. I hope you managed to escape some days of mindless deskwarming and could enjoy some of summer's highlights. A highlight for me was trying to devour a watermelon in three days. Heads up if you want to make a boozy watermelon concoction: it takes over 12 hours for alcohol to infuse into it. You're welcome!

I managed to escape Gunma's hottest day on record of over 40 degrees this year by going to Yamagata Prefecture for some solo car camping. It's something I have never done before, but I'm really glad that I tried out. Forget New Zealand being a great country for freedom camping, Japan is an *incredible* place to freedom camp. I slept in some stunningly beautiful places and no one seemed bothered by my presence. As long as you use common sense and take your rubbish home, there are no issues! If you are interested in someday giving freedom camping a go in Japan, I recommend checking out the Facebook group "Free camping and hot springs in Japan" [here](#). It's not perfect, but it's a great place to start! For now I will be eyeing up all the free camping in Hokkaido and daydreaming about a campervan adventure surrounded by the *momiji*.

September is an exciting time for CONNECT as we welcome our new team for 2020-2021. If you want to check out their faces and learn more about them head to our Meet the Team [page](#). I'm thrilled to have some Tohoku representation this year, which includes the apple-loving northern prefecture of Aomori, but our staff members can be found across all of Japan and beyond. I'm so excited to get to know everyone better as we work on our online magazine together! If you are interested in writing for CONNECT you can either contact me on connect.editor@ajet.net or if you want to contact our staff, their email addresses can be found on our Meet the Team page.

My picks from the September issue include an interview with a personal community hero for me, Simon Yates, who has informally translated the news into English regarding COVID-19 for over 100 days in "Community Heroes Spotlight: COVID-19 News Summary"; another COVID-19 piece written by staff member Alice French about the culture of cleanliness amongst a pandemic in "Keeping Covid Out: A spotlight on Japan's culture of cleanliness in the COVID-19 era"; over in Travel we learn about an 700 km coastal trail which came about after the devastating 2011 tsunamis and earthquakes which hit the Pacific Coast in "The Michinoku Coastal Trail"; our Arts section editor Jessica Craven interviews an amazing Tokyo self-taught artist in "Auspicious Symbols and Unexpected Wonders of the City"; and a previous Sado Island JET writes about the island's famous three-day music festival with "Earth Celebration: The Heartbeat in the Sea of Japan".

Until October's issue where we will be revealing two new features of CONNECT!



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Alice Ridley

"President (Bolsonaro), why did your wife Michelle receive 89,000 reais from Fabrício Queiroz?," — netizens of Brazil right now

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"I don't smile for the camera, I only smile for you." — Joji, "Attention"

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"Muddy water is best cleared by leaving it alone." — Alan Watts "

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Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can." — Arthur Ashe

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"To dwell on the past is to lose one's path."
— Lara, Superman

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"There has always been a place for mountains in the hearts of Japanese people." — Fukada Kyūya, author of "100 Japanese Mountains"

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"It's not so much the heat, it's the humidity that'll kill you." — Irv, Cool Runnings

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"Fairy tales are more than true—not because they tell us dragons exist, but because they tell us dragons can be beaten." — Neil Gaiman, paraphrasing G. K. Chesterton

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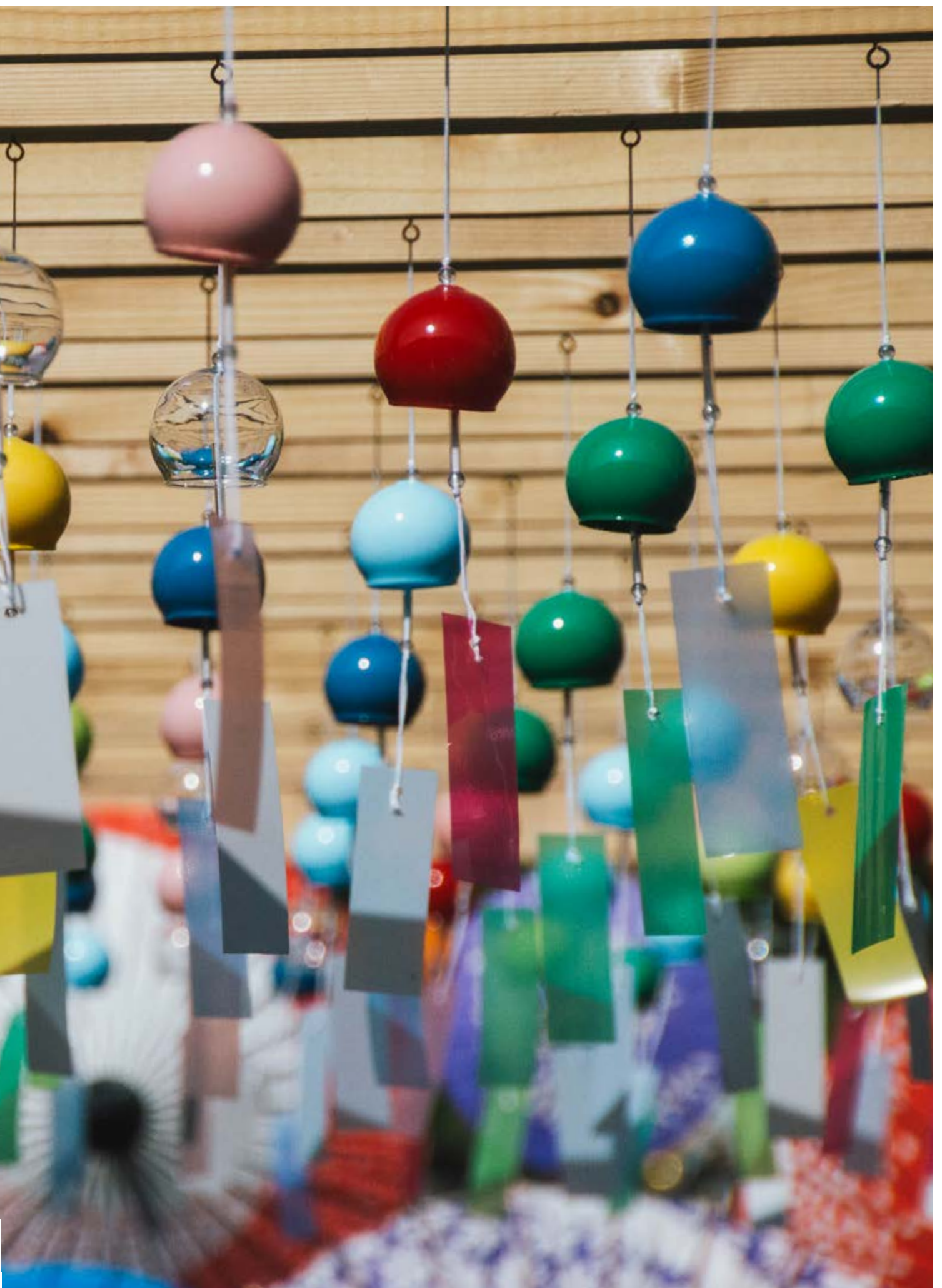
"Keep your face to the sun and you will never see the shadows." — Helen Keller

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*"Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication."
— Leonardo da Vinci JC*



How to Beat the Heat

A stylized sun with orange rays is positioned to the right of the title. The rays are depicted as short, thick, orange brushstrokes radiating outwards from behind the word 'Heat'.

Kevin Feeley (Gunma 2019-20)

Seasons, like most things, are a matter of preference. Many people look forward to summer as a vacation, as freedom from the cold, and as a time to tan. Some people want to live perpetually in autumn. But no matter who you are, you're still human—and when the summer heat comes around, you still sweat, you still burn, and you still have to go outside at some point, no matter how much you'd rather stay inside with your air conditioning. When you have to go outside, it's important to dress appropriately; so, here are my tips for combatting the heat as summer comes to a close.



Photo by Greg Raines on Unsplash

1. Light Colors

Yes, you look good in black, but do you really feel good when you wear all black under the beating sun?

That was rhetorical: the answer is no, because dark colors—especially black—are scientifically proven to absorb heat a lot more than lighter ones. Don't question science. If you are one who finds themselves dressing in all black all-year-round, switch it up a bit by throwing on a white T-shirt and acid wash jeans—an iconic summer look. If it's too hot for the jeans, a pair of chino shorts in pink, blue, or even khaki will pair nicely with it. If you don't like the crispness of the white tee, try it in another color. Just make sure it's a lighter shade.

A caveat to this tip—that I've sadly had to learn from experience—is that lighter shades of grey tend to show sweat far more easily than other colors, so if you find yourself still sweating in light colors, keep that in mind if you want to avoid looking like you've been steaming next to the conbini pork buns.

2. Light Fabrics

Still sweating in those light colors? Well, as I mentioned with the jeans, it might be too hot out for your favorite pink sweater. When the temperature creeps up there, even basic cotton shirts and shorts can feel like death, at which point, it might be time to break out even lighter weight fabrics. For me, my go-to is linen. A linen shirt, even a long sleeve Oxford shirt, can be cooler to wear than a heavier cotton T-shirt because it keeps the sun off my skin but allows any semblance of a breeze to cut right through me and cool me down. Linen pants have the same effect, though if your legs are as hairy as mine, shorts may be a better move regardless.

If linen isn't your cup of tea, try a sportier fabric like dry-fit, which can wick away moisture so you don't feel quite as sweaty on those hotter days and has the added benefit of being made to sweat in so it doesn't wear out as quickly as some traditional fabrics.

3. Avoid Tight-Fits

Regardless of how comfortable you may be in tighter-fitting clothing, tighter clothes don't breathe as well, meaning they are exceptionally hotter than looser fits. For me, the tighter the item, the more it'll make me sweat on those late summer days, so I tend to stick with looser, flowing garments that allow air to siphon in and out, like light-weight oversized shirts, Oxfords, short sleeve button-ups, and shorts.

If you find yourself wanting to wear jeans or pants, try cuffing the pant legs and rolling them to expose your ankles. It's remarkable the effect that such a subtle change can have by preventing hot air from getting stuck and cooking your legs and allowing any passing breeze to shoot up from the ankle to cool you down.



Photo by João Jesus from Pexels

4. Undershirts

I know what you're thinking: why on earth should I put on more layers than I have to when it's 98 degrees Fahrenheit outside and more humid than your average day in Miami? Well, if you're like me, it can be a bit of a double-edged sword. Yes, you add an extra layer of fabric, which will likely make you feel a bit hotter, but in a scenario where you have to look professional and would literally die if you sweat through your suit—yes, I've been there—an undershirt can be a life-saver. It takes the full brunt of your body's responses and absorbs most of your sweat, allowing you to save some semblance of your dress shirt and suit to look presentable. You can even combine tips here and opt for a dry-fit undershirt to practically guarantee that you'll look your best, even when feeling your worst.

5. Keep a Handkerchief

It's a bit old-fashioned, but I like to keep something to dab my forehead and forearms so that I don't glisten enough to blind passersby. While allowing yourself to sweat will ultimately help cool you down, it can be a bit embarrassing in certain situations, so having a way to quickly wipe yourself down is always welcome.

For those of you who want to take this tip to the next level, I present to you: Gatsby wipes. If you haven't heard of them, they are cooling deodorant wipes that make your skin feel ice-cold. Taking a minute to wipe these on your arms, legs, and forehead before going out can keep you feeling cool for the better part of the day. If you happened to forget your pack when heading out in the morning, fear not, for most conbini have them readily available. For those in the inaka, like me, maybe plan ahead.



Photo by Artem Beliaikin on Unsplash

6. Be Confident

If all else fails, and you find yourself burning up because it's literally too hot to handle outside, fear not. Remember that you are a human being and that sweating is a natural, human response to the heat. You can do your best to keep yourself cool with lighter colors, lighter fabrics, and looser fits and try to keep yourself dry with undershirts and Gatsby wipes, but sometimes, it's just too hot and humid for you to do anything about it.

If you find yourself on one of those days, nervous that you're about to sweat through your suit in front of your superintendent, or worse, the mayor, remember that you're human, that your body is functioning normally, that they're just clothes that you can wash or replace, and that everything will be fine. The anxiety of being sweaty can oftentimes make you sweat more, so in moments where you find yourself nervous about looking unprofessional, take a breath, drink some cold water, and remember that you're okay.

And maybe pack an extra shirt . . . Autumn will be here soon.

Kevin Feeley was born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the United States, and graduated from Amherst College with an English degree in 2019 before joining the JET Program. He wants to go to law school to do public defense work for people who cannot afford an attorney.

REMEMBERING KANSAI YAMAMOTO

Shannon Stocker

The fashion world continues to mourn the death of renowned fashion designer Kansai Yamamoto. Born in 1944 in Yokohama, Yamamoto died aged 76 of acute myeloid leukaemia. He is survived by his daughter, Mirai, who confirmed the news on Instagram with a post that told of her father's peaceful passing surrounded by loved ones.

The designer is widely remembered as an icon in the fashion industry for his eclectic, gender-defying aesthetics that were far ahead of their time. His sculptural garments were inspired by the concept of *basura*, translated as flamboyance or excess. The distinctiveness of his designs earned Yamamoto the life-changing opportunity to exhibit his "womenswear" collection in London, UK, in 1971.

From that point onwards, Yamamoto caught the attention of a number of high profile celebrities. Particularly that of singer David Bowie, who struck up a

relationship with Yamamoto and continued to wear exclusive pieces throughout his career. This collaborative friendship was brilliantly controversial, and continues to inspire designers to this day, including John Paul Gaultier and Raf Simons.

Toward the end of his life, Yamamoto founded his legacy, the *Nippon Genki Project*. It harnesses the designer's relentless positivity and champions young designers. Kansai Yamamoto will be memorialised through his contributions to fashion—past, present and future.

Shannon is our Fashion and Beauty Editor. She has just graduated from Central Saint Martins in London, UK and currently lives in Liverpool. She will be moving to Japan to work as an Assistant Language Teacher as soon as the borders reopen!

PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM
OF ART KANSAI YAMAMOTO
EXHIBIT ENTERANCE DESIGN





Mary Fisher (Niigata)



EARTH CELEBRATION

THE HEARTBEAT IN THE SEA OF JAPAN



Sitting under the open night sky, the harbor breeze cooling the Ogi port, I stared at the enormous drums onstage. The crowd was as close as seated people could be without touching, with attendants asking everyone to leave no spaces. The lights went down and despite the crowd, despite being outdoors, despite the venue bordering the harbor, it was completely silent. There were no lights, no illuminated screens from cell phones or cameras, and everyone held perfectly still.

Then came the rumble. It was so soft that I was certain I was hearing my own heart. But it started to reverberate through my chest, my head, and my limbs. A beat emerged from the rumbling and my pulse matched the tempo. A flute pierced through the rhythm and I could feel it in my core. The lights began to fade in and on stage were a dozen drummers standing perfectly poised.

The Kodō concert had begun. It would finish with the entire performing ensemble of over 30 people and their special guests from overseas on stage together. The last number was a culmination of the

past few days of sharing cultures and experiences and music. They danced with massive taiko drums strapped over their shoulders, smiling and shouting, blasting confetti into the jubilant crowd.

And that was the grand finale of Earth Celebration, the 3-day music festival held every August on the southern tip of Sado Island. The island, located off the Niigata coast, is usually remembered for its well-preserved customs and historic gold mine. But since 1988, Earth Celebration has been attracting between 5,000-10,000 people annually for what is best described as an international *matsuri*. Days are filled with cultural workshops and local experiences plus a market of various food and goods. Nights are centered around lively concerts from international artists and the famed taiko group Kodō.

A Westerner might first notice that Earth Celebration is much smaller than well-known music festivals like Coachella or Lollapalooza. However, this factor is key to making a more enjoyable experience for guests. Earth Celebration





is focused on entertainment that broadens your appreciation of the world. Workshops, local tours, and activities offer a sense of community and participation.

In order to make the weekend accessible for foreigners and Japanese alike, there is a fusion of festival characteristics. The tone of a traditional matsuri is set by the street processions, the highlighting of traditions, booths offering local crafts and fun, and the abundant treats on sticks. Incorporating the more Western-style focus on music and theatrics, with nightly grandiose concerts, gives the weekend a uniquely blended feel.

About Kodō

So who are the organizers and why is traditional culture so important to them? Earth Celebration is the collaborative effort of Kodō and the people of Sado Island. Kodō (鼓童) is one of the most famous and enduring musical ensembles in the field of taiko drumming. Their use of various traditional instruments and regional styles helps their music better represent the diversity of Japan.

Since 1981, Kodō has been touring and familiarizing the world with the Japanese art of taiko. They have participated at global events such as the Nobel Peace Prize Concert, the FIFA World Cup, the Olympics Arts Festival, and the soundtrack for the major motion picture “Hero”. The group is dedicated to presenting traditional Japanese culture faithfully. It was this desire to preserve and honor the traditional arts that struck a chord with the people of Sado.

Sado Island has a rich history despite its remote location. Festivals, rituals, folklore, and artforms have thrived with few disruptions. When Kodō was looking for a location to establish their center of

operations, Sado turned out to be the ideal environment. For the past 30 years, Kodō has been based on the Ogi Peninsula of Sado. On this southernmost tip, they built Kodō Village as a training ground and headquarters for members and staff. Apprentices live on-site while the ensemble members are able to take a home nearby.

Earth Celebration is more than a music festival. It is an opportunity for Kodō to bring the world into the unique atmosphere that keeps their work focused. Likewise, it is an opportunity for the people of Sado to share the traditions they have worked hard to maintain. Be ready for a full-on experience.

What to Expect

Earth Celebration is an interactive experience offering workshops and presentations that teach festival-goers about the traditional arts unique to Sado. Many of the hands-on tutorials and intimate performances do cost money (including travel expenses and equipment rental) and have limited space, so it's important to look through the options and buy tickets early. Most events, with the exception of performances, are able to offer English assistance. However, many of the workshops ask for no photography/recording.

The Kodō workshops are a highlight every year. The taiko drumming class is usually one of the first ticketed events to sell out. A senior member of Kodō leads the group through the basics of taiko drumming; you will be working up a sweat so dress comfortably. In the vocal workshop you will be taught the hauntingly beautiful singing techniques used in Kodō performances. And Kodō also has a dance presentation. *Hana Hachijo* is a dance technique created by a senior member of Kodō specifically to be performed alongside drumming. (And if you aren't lucky enough to secure a ticket: you still have the opportunity to catch the free demonstration by Kodō's recent apprentices and hear about their life as students in Kodō Village).

The Sado Island workshops are equally entertaining. *Onidaiko* is one of the most highly regarded Sado traditions: the famous demon drumming. On Sado, *oni* are regarded as protectors and are called on to chase away evil. Every major event or turning of the season is marked by onidaiko being performed. It is part drumming, part dancing, and part acting; you will learn to portray the oni unable to resist the call of the drum. The troupe that teaches their local brand of onidaiko is native to Ryotsu, the northern port of Sado, and brings the full regalia.



Photo: Mary Fisher



And if you want to learn something more delicate, there is the *okesa* workshop. This dance began early on when Sado was a major port on the *Kitamae-bune* trade route, and of course every town has their specific style. While only some people are trained in *onidaiko*, **EVERYONE** on Sado knows the *okesa*. You'll want to learn this dance so you can join in the late-night festivities on the Ogi streets.

Earth Celebration charts buses to take you to recreational spots around the island as well. Noh performances, tea ceremonies, sea kayaking, the preserved neighborhood of Shukunegi, sake brewery tours and meals, the Iwakubi rice terraces, *taraibune* rides, gold mine tours, and more. These activities are available on Sado throughout the year, but the group dynamic is something that shouldn't be missed.



And for the thrifty festival-goer who is trying to have fun and not spend much, save your money for the concerts and enjoy Ogi! There will be bands playing throughout the day, drum circles, storytellers, parades marching through the streets, and by night one you'll already recognize the drumbeat of an approaching oni. Harbor Market attracts vendors from all over Japan and has fun and delicious foods from Sado and far off countries.

As for the Earth Celebration nights, it's all about the concerts. If you are smart, you will purchase a three-night concert pass because these performances are unlike anything you've ever seen before. Special guests are invited every year from around the world, deepening the sense of global community. Just in recent years, there have been musical guests from

South Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, Belgium, Indonesia, and the Ainu tribe of Hokkaido. With a multitude of different styles and sounds, it is the height of cultural exchange. The final night always ends with a spectacular Kodō performance under the stars. Out of respect for the performers and their effort to create a complete experience, there are no cameras allowed in these concerts.

With the recent global pandemic, Kodō has been especially focused on giving hope and comfort through their social media accounts. Rather than cancel Earth Celebration this year, the organizers have found innovative ways to keep the festival alive via online participation. Workshops have been provided to a limited few via Zoom so as to keep with the intimate class structure one would normally experience in person. It is more difficult for them to have English support for these workshops, but they have gone so far as to ship out electronic taiko drums for the workshops (these must be returned afterwards). As for the concerts, video will always pale in comparison to live performances. To make up for this, Kodō is showing the natural beauty of Sado that most Earth Celebration guests don't get to see. They are recording their acts at different (often hard to reach) locations, showcasing their island home in a different way. This year, Earth Celebration will come to you.

Earth Celebration will change the way you think of music festivals. You will leave feeling like you not only attended an event, but that you took part in it. Follow the drums and we'll see you there.



Photo: Mary Fisher

Here's some insider information to help you plan your

Concert tickets (adults):

¥4500-5500 per night; ¥15000 for 3-day pass

Workshops: ¥1500-4000 per session

Getting to Sado is an adventure in itself. Your only way of getting on the island is by ferry, either from Niigata City or Naoetsu. Whichever route/boat you choose, remember to **direct your city taxi to Sado Kisen** or you might end up at the shipyard.

Niigata/Ryotsu (northern port)

1. Car Ferry: 2.5 hours; cheapest, gentle rocking, easier for large groups
2. Jetfoil: ~1 hour; most expensive, reserved seats only, rougher on sea-sickness

Naoetsu/Ogi (southern port/Earth Celebration location)

1. High-Speed Car Ferry: ~1.5 hours; mid price, reserved seats, roughest on sea-sickness
2. ****BONUS**** Morning after Earth Celebration, Kodō does a ferry send-off

Earth Celebration does employ charter buses and shuttles for certain affiliated locations (workshops/campgrounds) but if you plan to do any independent exploring of Sado outside of the Ogi Port, you'll probably want to rent a car. Travelling around the peninsula by bike is possible, but the hills are no joke and towns are very spread out, so you're likely to be spending all your precious time pedaling. Car rental offices are located near either port.

And lastly, where do you plan to stay? There are hotels both nearby and scattered across the island. I'd suggest you book close and book quick. There is fun to be had well into the night that you don't want to miss out on. For the more economical and experienced festival-goer, I suggest the Sobama campground! Sobama is still on the Ogi Peninsula, about 20 minutes away by car/bus. They have tents and other camping gear available to rent and Earth Celebration has a shuttle service between the campground and the port. You do still need to call and make a reservation for the spot and gear.

Mary Fisher is a former S graduate who graduated from the University of New South Wales with a B.A. in East Asian Languages and is currently attending New York University for Creative Writing. She mi and sushi most of all.



Sado JET. She
y of Kansas with
es and Cultures
castle University
sses Sado rice

LINKS

[Earth Celebration](#)
[Sado Kisen timetable](#)
Info regarding [Sobama campground](#)
Info regarding [local/EC buses](#)
Info regarding [car/bike rentals](#)
[Kodō website](#)



SEPTEMBER RELEASES

Rachel Fagundes (Okayama)

MOVIES

September 4

- Mid90s (2018)
- The Fanatic (2019)
- Minding the Gap (2018)
- Pavarotti (2019)
- Forbidden Dream (2019)
- The Brightest Roof in the Universe (2020)

September 11

- Midway (2019)
- Countdown (2019)
- Malibu Road (2020)
- The Specials (2019)
- The Spy (2019)
- Last Letter (2018)
- Umibe no Étranger (2020)
- Shinchan: Crash! Scribble Kingdom and Almost Four Heroes (2020)
- The Cornered Mouse Dreams of Cheese (2020)
- João, o Maestro (2017)
- Shin-chan: Crash! Scribble Kingdom and Almost Four Heros (2020)

September 19

- Ville Neuve (2018)

September 18

- Tenet (2020)
- Escape from Pretoria (2020)
- Martin Eden (2019)
- Bring Me Home (2019)
- Violet Evergarden: The Movie (2020)
- Hitsville: The Making of Motown (2019)
- Omoi, Omoware, Furi, Furare (2020)
- Daughters (2020)
- Shika No Ou (2020)
- New Moon Hotel (2019)

September 19

- Vitalina Varela (2019)

September 25

- The King's Man (2020)
- The Addams Family (2019)
- The Wild Goose Lake (2019)
- Matthias & Maxime (2019)
- The Climbers (2019)
- Hitman: Agent Jun (2020)
- The Climbers (2019)
- The Legend of Tomiris (2019)
- Midnight Swan (2020)

September 26

- Isadora's Children (2019)

GAMES

September 1

- Crusader Kings 3 (PC)
- Iron Harvest (PC)
- Ary and the Secret of Seasons (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

September 3

- WRC 9 (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Spellbreak (PC, PS4, Xbox One)

September 4

- Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 1 and 2 remaster (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Marvel's Avengers (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Stadia)
- NBA 2K21 (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, Stadia)

September 8

- Necromunda: Underhive Wars (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Kingdoms of Amalur: Re-Reckoning (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Star Renegades (PC)

September 11

- Inertial Drift (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

September 15

- Spelunky 2 (PS4)
- PES 2021 Season Update (PC, PS4, Xbox One)

September 18

- WWE 2K Battlegrounds (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- Crysis Remastered (PC, PS4, Xbox One)

September 22

- 13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim (PS4)

September 24

- Serious Sam 4 (PC, Stadia)
- Tears of Avia (PC, Xbox One)
- Going Under (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

September 25

- Port Royale 4 (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Mafia: Definitive Edition (PC, PS4, Xbox One)

September 30

- Baldur's Gate 3 - Early Access (PC, Stadia)

Unspecified Date

- Second Extinction - Steam Early Access (PC)

Sources:

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

<https://bit.ly/2LeenQe><https://www.vg247.com/2020/02/18/video-game-release-dates-2020/>

MORE THAN JUST A FACE IN THE CROWD

THE WORLD OF JAPANESE IDOLS THROUGH THE EYES OF A FOREIGN FAN

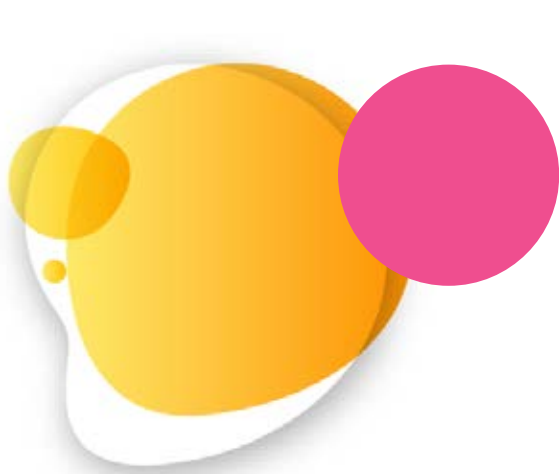
Vikki Evans (Yamagata)

Unless you've been living under a rock for the past few years, you will most likely be aware of the phenomenon that is K-Pop. Korean pop groups — also known as K-Pop idols — such as BTS, BLACKPINK and IZ*ONE have become so famous all around the world that even my retired 67-year-old father back in the UK is at least aware of their existence. However, even though most of you reading this are either living in Japan, have previously lived in Japan, or have very strong ties to Japan, you are probably less aware of J-Pop idols.

In the most basic terms, “idol” refers to almost any pop music performer in Japan. They can be a soloist or in a group, male or female, and with the rise of “virtual idols” through anime such as “Love Live”, “Idolmaster”, and “Idolish7”, they don't even have to be real people anymore. Most idols are managed by a production company

and the vast majority of idol production companies in Japan will only manage either male or female performers; unlike in Korea, in Japan it's extremely rare for male and female idols to be managed by the same company.

Even if you aren't fully aware of them, idols are a staple of Japanese culture. If you live, or have ever lived, in Japan, then I can guarantee that you have heard an idol song or seen posters of idol groups somewhere around. Even as I'm writing this, one of the biggest groups in the country, Keyakizaka46, has a promotion going on in Lawson stores. Just last week I heard a song by BEYOOOOONDS, a group who debuted in 2018, in a bakery when I was buying my breakfast. If you spend any time in Tokyo then you may see members of indie or underground idol groups handing out flyers to promote their performances. You really can't escape idol culture.



I've been following various J-Pop idol groups since I was 11-years-old, initially discovering a group called Buono, who recorded many of the opening and closing songs for the anime "Shugo Chara". After looking up their music videos on YouTube (and probably annoying the life out of my parents by attempting to copy the dance moves every night, when I should have been asleep), I also discovered many other J-Pop idol groups who were managed by the same company as Buono. The name of one of these groups, Morning Musume, may ring a bell as they are one of the most famous groups in Japan. Watching these 10 (at that point) girls smiling and singing and dancing just made me really happy. Their songs were catchy, their dancing was amazing, and their energy was infectious.

I WAS HOOKED, AND MY BANK BALANCE HAS DEFINITELY SUFFERED FOR IT EVER SINCE

I went to my first idol live (the more commonly used term in Japan for a concert is a "live") back in 2017. It was in Paris, when legendary

idol group C-ute were disbanding and performed two overseas lives to say goodbye to their fans: one in Mexico and one in Paris. The atmosphere was electric, with the room filled with fans from all over Europe as well as Japanese fans who had come over for this unique experience. The venue was an explosion of colour, with fans holding their penlights aloft and calling out fanchants in complete sync with one another.

I should probably go over some basic terminology here. Penlights are battery-powered glowsticks which you can change the colour of with the push of a button. In almost all idol groups, each member will have a specific colour associated with them, and you show your support for your favourite member by having your penlight set to their colour. So if your favourite member's colour is red, then you'd turn your penlight red.

Fanchants are another staple of idol lives and probably one of my favourite things about them. This is when the fans all sing, shout or

Photo (source): PandaDragon on Twitter



chant together before, during or after a song. This can range from simply calling out your favourite member's name, to joining in with some of the lyrics, to full on raps that only the fans do during the bridge of a song when the members are doing a dance break. It can be pretty impressive to witness.

I was lucky enough to attend five different idol events in Europe between 2017 and 2019, and since coming to Japan I have been attending idol events almost religiously at least a few times a month. Like I said, my bank balance has suffered. The groups that I support, however, have changed a bit since I was 11. While back then I mainly supported girl groups like Morning Musume and C-ute, I've now joined the other camp and mainly support male idol groups. The specific groups I like are slightly more underground than the huge names of Arashi or King&Prince, but to me that's part of the appeal. With the more famous groups, you can watch them perform live and see their videos online. Once in a blue moon, they'll do a handshake event or a cheki (photo) event with fans, but for the most part you'll be one face in a crowd of hundreds or thousands.

However, with my "boys" (as my friends call them to bully me), they actually know their fans' names and remember things about them.

MESEMOA ONE OF THE GROUPS I SUPPORT HAS 9 MEMBERS AND THEY ALL KNOW MY NAME THEY KNOW I'M AN ALT IN YAMAGATA AND THEY KNOW I'M ORIGINALLY FROM THE UK

I have inside jokes with some of them and silly dance moves that I do with others. The 7 members of PandaDragon, my favourite idol group, also all know my name and random things about me, like who my favourite member of the group is or the fact that I love Disney. The members of the one girl group I do still actively

support, BANZAIJAPAN, even know things about my family and ask after them when I see them. More underground idols can have much more personal relationships with their fans, which is partly what has drawn me to them.

Plus, their songs are hella good. Go look up "Disorderly Crowd" by MeseMoa and just try and not bop along.

Honestly, being a foreign fan helps a lot. Just by virtue of me being a foreigner I am probably much easier to recognize and remember, not only by the idols themselves but also by other fans. And fans are where this can get a little complicated. I have had nothing but good experiences with other fans at idol events, even with the language barrier, and I've made a lot of friends at events. However, and they will be the first to admit this, Japanese idol fans can be straight-up crazy and slightly terrifying at times. Getting tickets and merchandise can be a bit of a bloodbath, and at the events in Europe I did see some Japanese fans take advantage of the fact that the European fans weren't entirely sure of what was going on in order to get merchandise before them or get better seats for the concert. However, honestly, those situations have been few and far between. What's happened more often is I have been very well looked after by Japanese fans at events, if they have ever seen me looking lost or confused. Every time I go to a live, I come home having made a new friend. MeseMoa, PandaDragon and the other groups in their company (Daredemo Dream, or DD for short) also have a thriving online community with both Japanese and overseas fans sharing art, videos, memes, and just generally screaming about our favourite members on Twitter.



Photos: Vikki Evans



Of course, recently, I haven't been attending live concerts for a rather obvious reason. The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that all concerts and other forms of live entertainment have ground to a halt all over the world, and Japan is no different. MeseMoa were meant to have a nationwide tour starting in March and ending in a huge concert at the end of August at Pacifico Yokohama. Their entire tour was cancelled which, for a fairly small company, could easily have been financially devastating, what with venue cancellation fees and refunding tickets.

Unable to hold any concerts, MeseMoa's company, which consists of four male idol groups and a training program with a further 10 members, came up with a few ways to keep the lights on as well as keeping their fans engaged. From live streaming concerts with no audience and minimal staff to having phone and video calls with fans, to creating new merchandise to sell, they have enabled fans to continue to support the idols who mean so much to us without putting our health at risk.

And it's not just DD — idol groups all over the country have been doing similar events with live broadcasts and phone calls. Some groups with smaller fanbases, like the aforementioned BANZAIJAPAN, have started doing live performances again with limited numbers of tickets being sold, mandatory social distancing and mask-wearing, and no meet-and-greet at the end like they would usually have. Sadly, as these events are in Tokyo, it will be a while before I'll be able to go back to the lives that I love so much!

Idol culture isn't perfect. From idols being under love bans (not allowed to have a boyfriend or girlfriend), to fans crossing the line and being very inappropriate toward or

even stalking members, to scandals where idols can get fired for doing something seemingly trivial, there are a lot of things that could and should be improved here. I'm lucky that the groups that I support are under a small company where an ex-member of MeseMoa is actually the company president, so they are managed, in my opinion, much more fairly than bigger companies who heavily restrict what their idols can and can't do.

Even so, idol fans all over the world are going to continue supporting the performers they love so much because, in the end, it's an escape. Idols sing and dance to make their fans smile and forget their problems, at least for a little while. Some idols join groups when they're just teenagers and fans get to see them improve and grow. Seeing them overcome their struggles can really help these fans to overcome their own hardships.

From me dancing around in my bedroom to the Shugo Chara opening at 11-years-old, to me singing my heart out with 800 other MeseMoa fans in Osaka in December last year, idols and their music have certainly got me through some of the most difficult times in my life. I'll always be grateful for the positive impact they've had and will continue to have on me, and however far into the future it may be, I'm looking forward to the day when I can go back to a live in person and cheer with all my might for those wonderful performers on stage.

Vikki Evans is a second-year ALT from South-West Scotland, living and working in Yamagata City. Most of her time is spent screaming about idol boys and watching Disney, but she also makes odottemita dance videos, which you can find [here](#).

IDOLS AND THEIR MUSIC HAVE CERTAINLY GOT ME THROUGH SOME OF THE MOST DIFFICULT TIMES IN MY LIFE.

KEEPING COVID C

A SPOTLIGHT ON JAPAN'S CULTURE OF CLEANLINESS IN THE COVID

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2020

ARTS & CULTURE SECTION

Photo: Creative Commons



ALICE FRENCH (YAMAGATA)

We all remember our first time. The red-faced apologies. The awkward, shuffling retreat to the door. The vows never to make the same mistake again.

The unspeakable incident I'm referring to is, of course, the cardinal sin of forgetting to remove one's shoes before entering a Japanese house (if you thought I was referring to something else, please remove your mind from the gutter).

While stepping inside fully shod may not be a problem in one's home country, in Japan, it is considered the hallmark of rudeness.

However, the reason for this apparent obsession with removing shoes is far more complex than a simple desire to keep tatami mats clean. As anthropologist Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney revealed with her research in the '80s, the removal of one's shoes when entering the home also demarcates the *soto* (outside) from the *uchi* (inside), a dichotomy that underpins much of Japanese culture and society[1].

The *soto* vs *uchi* opposition applies not only to physical outdoor and indoor spaces, but also to social situations. One's own social circle (family, friends, and work colleagues) is considered *uchi*, associated with familiarity, safety, and comfort, whereas the rest of society

that lies outside representing the and dangerous. (and/or changing symbolises the c between what Oh as "the omnipres sanctuary that is **physical 'dirtiness' as *soto*, then, but ra ness'**; the fact tha social *uchi* realm traditionally defin *kaisha* (company) that it is customa shoes when ente or workplace, but konbini, superma all of these sites the latter three ex the *social* outside shoes is not deen

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OUT

COVID-19 ERA

ISSUE # 96

of that circle is soto, distant, unfamiliar, Removing shoes (into indoor slippers) crossing of the border (Anuki-Tierney refers to "ent outside" and the one's uchi. **It is not the that defines something rather its innate 'outside-** at it exists outside the (which, in Japan, is ed by family and/or). It is for this reason y to remove outdoor ering a home, hotel, t not when entering a rket, or bar. Although are *physically* inside, amples still represent e, and so removing ned necessary.

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of the soto vs uchi aced back to Shinto associate hygienic spiritual purity and gare (literally: 'stain'), urity. This is why it sh one's hands and

gargle with water upon entering a Shinto shrine, even though the majority of shrines are located outdoors. This ritual cleansing is believed to prevent any spiritual dirt from the outside world (soto) from entering the spiritually clean grounds (uchi) of the shrine. Of course, for the same reason, it goes without saying that one must also remove shoes when entering the actual shrine building (beware of 土足厳禁 (*sodoku genkin*: 'footwear prohibited') signs when sightseeing!). These beliefs explain the social emphasis put on the separation of soto and uchi in everyday life: the aim is always to prevent spiritual contamination of the uchi by the kegare with which the outside world is polluted.

It is this concept of kegare that really comes into its own in the context of a global pandemic. Kegare is ritual dirt, as famously defined by Mary Douglas: that which "offends against order[2]." Within the human experience, as cultural anthropologist Namihara Emiko explains in her work, *The Structure of Kegare*, kegare mainly manifests itself in the form of sin, death, illness, and



Photo: Tai's Captures on Unsplash.com

blood[3]. As such, COVID-19 falls into the category of kegare. Not only is it a deadly virus that has caused great suffering to many millions, but it also poses a very real threat to the social and economic stability of the nation. To keep COVID-19 confined to the soto of society is therefore of the utmost importance.

In some ways, this (perhaps sub-conscious) association of COVID-19 with kegare has proved very effective when dealing with the spread of the virus in Japan. Pre-existing concerns about keeping soto and uchi separate meant that handwashing and gargling upon



Photo: M. Louse

It is customary to remove shoes and leave them in the entrance hall before entering a Japanese house.

arriving home from any excursion were already commonplace here, whereas such habits have taken months to catch on in many other countries. What's more, as Cambridge University's Dr Brigitte Steger discovered in her research into cleanliness in evacuation shelters following the March 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, in times of instability and uncertainty, the differentiation between *soto* and *uchi* becomes even more clear-cut (I highly recommend a read of her article)[4]. I've certainly



Photo: Creative Commons

Deputy Prime Minister Aso Taro made headlines in June for insisting that Japan's low number of COVID cases was due to the country's high "cultural standards"

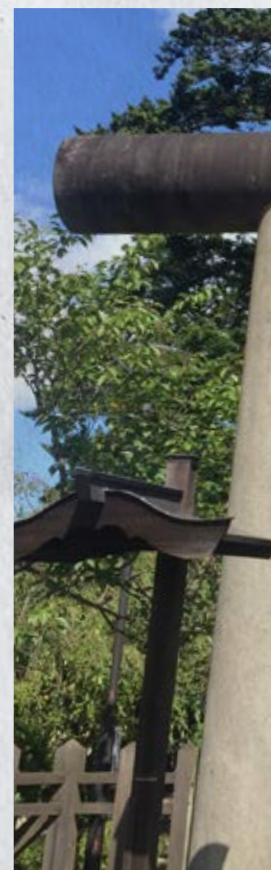
seen this heightening of concern in my office, as many colleagues have only recently undertaken a daily cleansing of their desks with alcohol wipes or damp cloths, clearly marking their workspace as their own personal, apparently COVID-free, *uchi*.

The same goes for mask-wearing, which was normalised in Japan well before the arrival of the virus, as a social courtesy (the idea being that you should wear a mask to avoid spreading whatever cold or illness you have to those around you). With the announcement of a pandemic, universal mask-wearing caught on

nationwide seemingly overnight, with none of the pushback that has been seen in many other countries. Wearing a mask now not only serves to protect those around you from any potential symptoms you may have, but also acts as a physical barrier between yourself and the dangerous *soto*, which has become synonymous with COVID.

The social element of the *soto* vs *uchi* binary may also have played a role in the incredibly low rate of community transmission in Japan. As explained above, not only physical spaces, but also social relationships are split into *uchi* and *soto* according to the traditional Japanese mindset. Those within one's *uchi* circle are those with whom one has the most frequent and prolonged contact (cohabiting family members, romantic partners, close friends, colleagues). People who inhabit the social *soto* (long distance family or friends, business associates, konbini cashiers, pretty much anyone else) are held, socially, at arm's length. This social distance (a phrase which is now all too familiar) is indicated by various social markers, including *keigo* (honorific language), which is typically used to express politeness to people one does not know very well. Therefore, whereas in the UK, for example, there was an enormous amount of confusion about who people were and were not allowed to have contact with during lockdown, in Japan these 'safe' and 'unsafe' social bubbles already existed. Perhaps this explains why social distancing in Japan has been so effective; it was already, to an extent, in place even before COVID came onto the scene. It would also not be a stretch to assume that the pre-defined *uchi* social circles also make it easier to track down and test those who have been in close contact with infected cases.

However, the ritualistic approach to cleanliness in Japan also sheds light on some of the nation's more puzzling COVID-19 policies. One of my favourite examples is the use of plain water in hand sanitizer bottles placed at the entrance of many shops and eateries.



Remember to wash your hands

This was especially true a few months ago, when hand sanitizer caused major shortages. I am sure that plain, room temperature water will have little effect on germs. In fact, germs will multiply without having a chance to even increase their numbers. In the traditional Japanese shrine, however, much more than shoes, the wetting of hands is a symbolic shift from *soto* to *uchi*. It may not remove germs, but it is thought to help in demarcating the boundary from the clean *uchi* to the dirty *soto*. Handwashing before entering a shrine: there is no stopping so there is no stopping the *soto* entering the shrine, but the ritual is to absolve visitors nonetheless.

At a macro level, the inherently safe and dangerous has a confusing travel guide national state of e



... hands to cleanse yourself of kegare before passing through the gate of a Shinto shrine!

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the idea of the uchi as
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led to some rather
guidelines. During the
emergency, declared in

mid-April, everyone was advised not to leave the prefecture in which they were living. Even in Tohoku, where I am based and where case numbers were relatively low, crossing the border into a neighbouring prefecture was considered a violation of the guidelines. In a way, this makes sense; limiting long-distance travel has been a staple of most countries' COVID policies. The difference in Japan, however, was that the emphasis was not on avoiding travel beyond a certain radius of one's home (e.g., 10 km), but on not crossing the prefectural border, no matter how far away it was. This is because, at a societal level, the prefecture is defined as uchi, and thus safe, and beyond the borders is soto, and so inherently risky. Many prefectures, including my own, Yamagata, even launched prefectural travel campaigns as soon as the state of emergency was lifted, actively encouraging prefectural residents to travel within the prefectural borders to restaurants, ryokans, and onsen. At least to me, this was surprising considering that, for many residents, a trip to an onsen at the opposite end of their own prefecture may be a far further, and potentially risky, journey than one

over the border into a neighbouring prefecture. In this case, the importance of the soto vs uchi boundary overrides the physical distance travelled and quantity of potential germs encountered.

It seems, then, that Japan's soto vs uchi dichotomy has the potential to be both helpful and hindering when it comes to dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Only time will tell how effective the Japanese government's strategy will be in the long-run, and I am by no means suggesting that tradition and superstition are the (only) foundations of Abe's policies. Nevertheless, I find it difficult not to wonder whether the "high cultural standards" infamously cited by Deputy Prime Minister Asō as the reason behind Japan's low number of COVID-19 deaths was not a reference to the soto/uchi framework[5]. If only the pandemic could be solved by something as simple as removing one's shoes. . .

Alice French is a second-year CIR from Cambridge, England, based at the Prefectural Office in Yamagata. When she is not singing in the shower or taking pictures of sunsets for Instagram, she can be found hiking one of Yamagata's many mountains.

SOURCES:

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Auspicious Symbols and Unexpected Wonders of the City


Interview with Tokyo Illustrator, Erica Ward

Jessica Craven (Saitama)



Planes by Erica Ward

 Erica E. Ward
2018



Erica Ward is one of the most active foreign artists I have seen in the Tokyo metro. I first saw her work at her solo exhibition *Rosenzu-iro* at CLOUDS ART + COFFEE gallery in Koenji, and I have been dying to ask her more about her illustrations ever since. I think she is very inspiring to other foreign artists in Japan, so I am thrilled to share our interview with you!

J: Where are you from, how long have you been in Japan, and what made you decide to come here?

E: I'm from Santa Cruz, California, and have been living in Japan since 2010.

I studied Japanese in both high school and university, and Japan was always a place and culture that held a lot of interest for me.

When I was a teenager, I had a very special chance to do a two-week host family stay in Santa Cruz's sister city, Shingu, Wakayama.

That visit really cemented my feeling that Japan was somewhere I wanted to spend more time. Sometimes I think about how those two weeks really influenced the course of my life.

I've always loved to draw, and Japanese culture and art also inspired creativity in me. Part of wanting to move here was a desire to be closer to that creative energy.

J: Tell us about your work.

E: I create pen and watercolor artworks that often include Japanese imagery and slight surrealism. I like to use watercolor to render people and objects semi-realistically, but then I use stark pen outlines to give the images a flat and more graphic look. Many of my pieces are *bijin-ga*, portraits of women in kimono, yet often with elements that break them out of the typical *bijin-ga* category.

J: What kind of themes or ideas does your work explore?

E: I like to present familiar things in a way that is not familiar.

By putting everyday objects or scenes into a new context, I think it puts a spotlight on those things as something special that we should appreciate or give some extra thought to. Similarly, I like to

put a slight spin on established symbols, such as Japanese seasonal imagery.

Lately, I'm also interested in expressing the relationship of identity—specifically, how the identity of the individual and the identity of the city are both completely independent and yet entirely interwoven at the same time. By drawing figures literally woven into city scenes, I'm searching for a wordless way to express this dynamic visually.

J: Where do you look for inspiration?

E: Often, I find inspiration in common scenes or objects when I least expect it. For example, in street signs, subway stations, old buildings. Something will catch my eye and, somewhere in my imagination, ideas start flashing around until suddenly, one day, I know that I have to sit down and turn the idea into a painting.

Erica's illustrations for a Kyoto calendar



The last few years living in Tokyo, I've been in continual amazement of how intricate the structure of the city is—the endless buildings and the overlapping layers of subways, basements, trains, busses, skyscrapers ... My artwork has grown more detailed and architectural since moving here, and inspiration is very connected to where I am physically.

J: Do you have a “formal” art education, or how did you learn how to illustrate?

E: I did not attend art school. I actually majored in Japanese and Linguistics at the University of Massachusetts, so, since childhood, I thought of art as a hobby rather than a strict career path. I was always doodling and sketching and, over time, had built up a small body of work. I did not receive any training or formal instruction, but my style likely evolved into something different than it would have been had I had a formal art education.

J: How did you get your start exhibiting work in Japan?

E: When I lived in Iwate, I made a lot of good friends, and they had started to notice some of my artwork that I'd posted on my social media pages. One friend reached out to ask if I would try hosting an art event with her, and we rented a space and did everything very DIY. We were blown away with the positive response of our friends, respective coworkers, and community, who came to see our show. This was the first event at which I presented myself as an artist, and I think it really opened up my confidence.

Later that year, I was put in touch with an artist in the town who had put a lot of love and effort into converting an old country school into a community art museum and art center. I remember being nervous handing her my portfolio and watching her look over my pieces. Closing the book, she said, “Let's do an exhibition. Now get home, you have your work to do!” It was the first time anyone would have called drawing my “work,” so I was very encouraged and motivated by her words.

Since then I have felt confident to approach venues or apply to events or exhibitions, and also can never downplay the support and connections that come from the community wherever I've lived—and also, a touch of serendipity.

Works from the *Rosenzu-iro* series



J: How do you think being in Japan has influenced or changed your art or yourself?

E: Living in Japan has definitely changed my art, and surely myself as well. What first comes to mind is a memory of myself some years ago, living in the countryside, saying, “I could never live in Tokyo,” imagining the streets busy and everything constantly noisy and crowded. Now I love Tokyo—and it’s not at all how I had assumed. I suppose just living in a foreign country and realizing how adaptable we really can be has changed me.

And my art, absolutely, as I have gained more understanding of cultural topics and images to depict and career opportunities with art as well. Last year, I illustrated a calendar for a Kyoto-based printing company, and it gave me a chance to really dive into researching Kyoto’s traditions and a chance to paint subject matter I love. This kind of chance wouldn’t have arisen if I lived outside of Japan, and my art continues to evolve with each experience.

J: Could you tell us about one (or more) of your recent exhibitions in Japan?

E: Last summer, I exhibited a series titled *Rosenzu-iro* (Colors of the Train Lines). This was a *bijin-ga* series of female portraits that paired a face to each color of the Tokyo

subway lines. I positioned objects that share the subway line color around each face and titled each piece after their respective line. For people living in Tokyo, the subway colors are something we see every day and feel a kind of endearing relationship with. We have such a fond connection with the colors but only ever get one context within which to see them. I wanted to play with the emotional connection we have to these colors by giving them a fresh new context.

My most recent exhibition, *Engimono*, was held at CLOUDS ART + COFFEE gallery in Koenji. This time, I broke away from figurative work and instead focused on *engimono* (Japanese lucky items) and cityscapes—weaving a giant Daruma, manekineko, and others into detailed cityscapes. Unlike my former works, this series had no people depicted on the tiny streets, an influence of seeing how the city changed during the state of emergency for coronavirus. I wanted the *engimono* to hopefully attract positive energy back into the year and also highlight the city and our neighborhoods as something that gives us security and something we should appreciate.

Works from the *Engimono* series on display



J: Do you have any other exhibitions scheduled currently?

E: No exhibitions scheduled as we all wait and watch with coronavirus. I do tabling events such as Design Festa, which is scheduled for November 7th and 8th, but there is a large chance it will be postponed. I plan to hold another solo exhibition in Koenji in summer 2021 and post any updates about exhibitions and events on my website.

J: What advice do you have for any foreign artists seeking to make connections or exhibit work in Japan?

E: I would say explore a variety of communities and get involved. Seek out art events and exhibitions by other artists, and show your support for people doing the kind of thing that you would like to try. In Tokyo, especially, there are endless events, group exhibitions, and so on; so, a little research, confidence, and sincerity can go a long way.

If you live in a more rural area, get to know business owners who might be interested in displaying art at their shop or suggest co-hosting an event. Local community centers have space available to reserve. People will be excited to support you but need to know what you are working on first!

If you would like to see more of Erica's work, check out the following sources:

Website: ericawardart.com which links to my webstore (English/International and Japanese/Domestic)

IG: <https://www.instagram.com/erica.ward.illustration/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ericawardart/>

Illustration books of both the Rosenzuiro series and Engimono series mentioned above are available for purchase for anyone interested in checking out the full series.

Jessica is a fourth-year American JET living in Saitama. On weekends she enjoys hiking in remote areas of Saitama or taking day-trips to Tokyo. When not adventuring, she can be found reading or creating her own artwork, which can be seen on her Instagram @jessica_craven_art.



STARS:

A glimpse into the works that banged in post-war Japan

Kayla Francis (Tokyo)

What exactly is it about art that creates world-wide recognition? What makes it so uniquely interesting that despite having different origins it can flourish to stardom in a completely different country? The Mori Art Museum set out to answer these questions with its new *Stars* exhibition. (1) Showcasing the work of the following contemporary artists: Yayoi Kusama, Lee Ufan, Tatsuo Miyajima, Takashi Murakami, Yoshitomo Nara and Hiroshi Sugimoto, the museum has taken the opportunity to celebrate the international stardom that the artists have reached in modern Japan and worldwide.

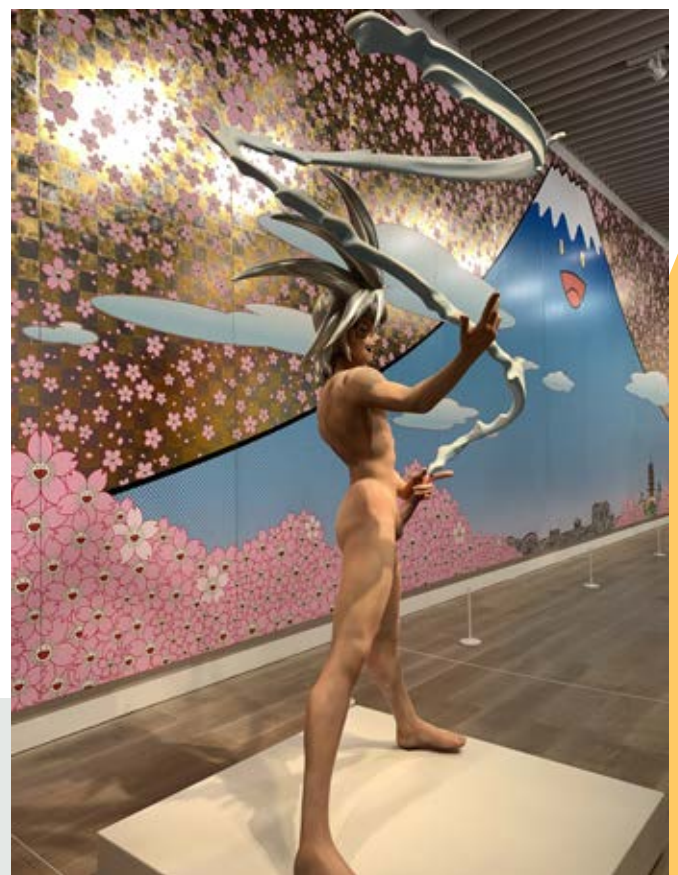
Takashi Murakami

The museum wasted no time in showing Takashi Murakami's work first. Japan is well known for its *kawaii* and *otaku* (geek/fandom) culture and Murakami's work is a rich embodiment of this. The artist is well known for his super flat and far from realistic designs. He does a great job mixing the bubblegum kawaii fantasy culture of Japan and extreme sexualisation. His work ranges from well-endowed anime-style sculptures to his adorably erratic and colourful mural of Mt. Fuji and flowers. Murakami is the embodiment of every geeky stereotype people have of Japan on crack. Murakami's massive sculptures of a troll-like figure are especially worth seeing. The attention to all of the small details makes the sculptures look ready to come alive at any point.

His smaller and highly sexualised anime-style characters do a great job of highlighting the unrealistic expectations of the human body that many people face today in modern-day in Japan.



Takashi Murakami paints "Self-Portrait" on Creative Commons





Lee Ufan

After the first shock to the senses, the exhibition takes a more mellow turn by leading onto Lee Ufan's exhibition. Away from the starkly bright colours and sensory overload of Murakami, Ufan's work makes you pause for a moment. As soon as you walk into his section you find small stones scattered across the floor. The Korean born minimalist artist sets out to remind viewers that everything in the world is connected. In an interview with *Apollo International Art Magazine*, Ufan touches on why stones are a recurring motif in his work, saying, "Stones are the oldest thing we ever encounter in our world. I really want you to hear the voice of these things: to put the manmade and non-manmade in juxtaposition." (2) The contrast between the exhibitions of Murakami and Ufan highlight the complexity of Japanese art.

Yayoi Kusama

Yayoi Kusama was arguably my favourite artist of the exhibition-though her work is not for people who suffer from trypophobia (fear of clusters of dots). Her work is a reflection of the visual and auditory hallucinations that she faced throughout her childhood. She does a brilliant job expressing her pain and suffering throughout her work. Her work creeps up on you-stare too long and you will half expect the figures to start moving. She does not hide away from her experiences of heartbreak shown through her paintings. Unfortunately, her most interesting work has a no-photo rule. After viewing her paintings and sculptures, step into a room filled with mirrors and you will find a viewing box in the middle of the room. Take a glance in and you feel like you're immersed inside a kaleidoscope.



Tatsuo Miyajima

The exhibition then leads onto Tatsuo Miyajima's *Sea of Time*, a dark room with the gentle sound of water and 3,000 LED lights numbered from 1 through 9 going black instead of reaching 0. Miyajima is known for his work surrounding the nuclear disasters in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, *Sea of Time* serves as a reminder of the Great East Japan Earthquake. Many people were involved in the placement of numerous LEDs. The constant changing of the numbers signify humanity, death and the way that time changes.

Yoshimoto Nara

Continuing with the contrasting theme, the exhibition leads onto the work of Yoshimoto Nara. This artist mixes innocence and adulthood to a startling level. Walk amongst this exhibition and you will feel like a child again. The giant doll-like house makes you feel small and the artwork bears some resemblance to the baby sun character from Teletubbies. However, this work is far from innocent. Looking into the house, you see crushed cans of strong zero on the floor. The artist also starts off his exhibition with a collection of his favourite albums, most of which are far from being child-friendly. The work is also far from cute-though it does have that *kawaii* factor the old toys and teddy bears are . . . well . . . creepy.



In a society that views mental health negatively and has a high suicide rate, it would seem that for many this work is seen as therapeutic for Japanese society and people worldwide.



Hiroshi Sugimoto

The exhibition ends with Hiroshi Sugimoto. Like the entirety of the *Stars* exhibition, Sugimoto is not for everyone. The artist welcomes you to view his work and the surroundings of his photos similar to how we would view objects left behind by our ancestors. This, however, wasn't for me. The artist brings your attention to how quickly life passes us by in a video of his garden project. In the video you can see him facing his mortality. However, this video had little impact on me as it cuts away every few seconds to a black subtitled screen which often came across as rambling. The rest of the exhibition only offers a few black and white photos of the sea and a polar bear. Though many widely celebrate his work, this one is a miss for me.

The Mori Art Museum did a fantastic job with the layout of the *Stars* exhibition. Although Japan has become famous in recent years for its anime and *kawaii*-style, *Stars* does a great job of reminding viewers of just how diverse Japanese art is. I saw a lot of suffering and trauma in the *Stars* exhibition. In a society that views mental health negatively and has a high suicide rate, it would seem that for many this work is seen as therapeutic for Japanese society and people worldwide. Though Japan has grown to an extreme level, now being one of the economic powerhouses of Asia, the stars here have shown that Japan has not stopped growing.

The exhibition is on until January 2021 and is only ¥2,000. It is highly recommended for anyone who wants to explore the different perspectives of modern-day Japan that they have to offer.

Sources:

[1] <https://www.mori.art.museum/en/exhibitions/stars/04/index.html>

[2] <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/solitary-soul-interview-with-lee-ufan/>

Kayla is a second-year UK JET currently living in Tokyo. When she isn't working she enjoys wandering through Tokyo and taking day-trips around Japan. When not exploring she can be seen cooking, digging into a good book and writing on her blog: <https://passportsandcookbooks.com/>

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"What is now proved was once only imagined."

— William Blake

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"I knew that if I allowed fear to overtake me, my journey was doomed. Fear, to a great extent, is born of a story we tell ourselves, and so I chose to tell myself a different story from the one women are told. I decided I was safe. I was strong. I was brave. Nothing could vanquish me." — Cheryl Strayed, author of "Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail"





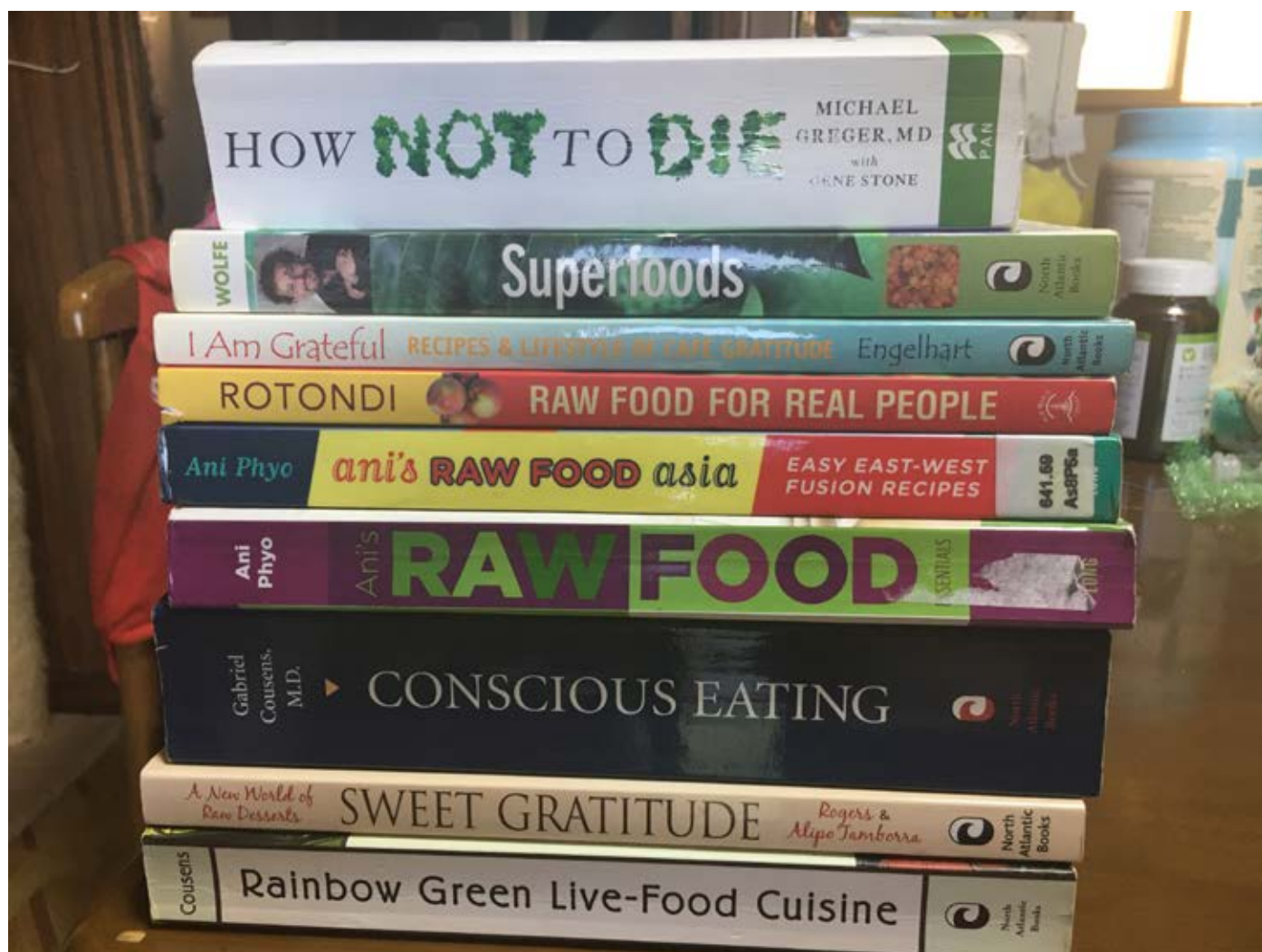
Fresh Fuel For the Bodies

A Journey into Raw Veganism
Sheila Mulherin (Hokkaido)

My journey with raw veganism started in 2009, when I returned to the USA from Germany, and my brother had started a raw vegan cleanse. Vegetarian at that time, I became allergic to milk products upon returning home. I experienced a fast learning curve with veganism while my brother was doing the same with raw veganism. He guided me through my new restrictions and planted a seed for raw veganism as well. He inspired the family with his skin clearing up, his outlook taking a 180, and the fresh energy he hadn't had in years. Fairly fit already, he looked even more toned, but he focused on his vitality and improved health. Raw uncooked food (heated until 118 degrees Fahrenheit or 48 degrees Celsius) still has all its living

enzymes and the highest amount of nutrition possible. It's healing food.

Later, in 2012 I enrolled in a raw vegan chef course. Raw vegan chef courses take place around the world, where you learn hands-on. The most accessible course for residents of Japan is in Bali, with a woman named Sayuri who speaks Japanese and English. I found one in my home state of Massachusetts, at the Organic Garden Café in Beverley. Upon enrollment in the internship, I received a file from the owner sharing his own wisdom and a list of books to read for a thorough introduction to the raw vegan lifestyle, including spirituality, nutrition, recipes, daily routine tips and other wellness tips to live your best life.



My collection of recommended books for the raw vegan journey. They all can be bought online and shipped to Japan for a reasonable fee.

I then began six weeks of working alongside the chefs as they guided us through making soups, dressing, salads, crackers, sprouting grains and legumes, wraps, “burger patties,” chocolates, pies, and “pizza,” among other creative dishes. We joked that we paid to be labor at the restaurant, yet we learned a lot through this hands-on experience and appreciated it. We sampled our creations and got discounts on the menu.

We also had some weird interactions. For instance, once a filmmaking group came in, looking for extras to act as World War II concentration camp victims in their film. Did they have an image in their heads of skinny sickly raw vegans? Most of the staff and interns were vegan, and a couple were 100% raw vegans. We were bright-eyed, fresh-faced, lean, and energetic with clear skin and enough meat on our bones. The restaurant owner, 100% or nearly 100% raw vegan, strong and fit, had a lot of meat on his bones. The positive inclusive environment inspired everyone. No one in the raw vegan community is expected to be 100% raw but to focus on the freshness and flavors of the food and the bubbling energy and vitality that increases with our increased raw food intake. Eating 70% or more raw food is enough to consider yourself a raw foodist.

I left the internship experience inspired and ready to embark on my raw food journey. I bought an Excalibur dehydrator, a Ninja mixer, and more raw vegan cookbooks, including works by authors Gabriel Cousens, Ani Phyo and Rod Rotondi.

Later, I became an English teacher in Thailand: a tropical fruit lover’s paradise. I indulged in dragonfruit, jackfruit, mangosteen, soursop, durian, mangos, papaya, and raw coconut meat. However, the public-school English teacher’s wage alone in Thailand doesn’t allow for luxuries such as a dehydrator and Vitamix. The abundant fresh tropical fruit satiated me. I enjoyed mango sticky rice, pad thai and other cooked vegan dishes as well. I continued running on my own and had plenty of energy. After this point, I moved to a new country with little tropical fruit—Japan—and my raw vegan lifestyle fell to the wayside.



An Excalibur dehydrator, good for making a

Relocating to Japan

Years passed, and in Japan my body ch of preservatives and starches. My running Bloated, queasy, and lethargic, I made a emailed the owner of the Organic Garden internship, asking for the same list of books I ordered those books and re-immersed m

Japan has a different selection of raw ing The local raw ingredients include: *nori* she oil, sesame seeds, soy sauce, plenty of pr brown rice, small soybeans, *adzuki* beans almonds, prunes, quinoa (for sprouting), mangos, chia seeds, hemp seeds and flax abroad include: cold-pressed coconut oil, vegan yogurt starters might not be raw, bu your gut flora outweigh the fact that it’s not



Dehydrated treats, wraps, crackers and "burgers"

changed. I ate processed vegan food with lots of sugar, and my digestive system protested. I made a drastic change to improve my quality of life. I went to Café, where I participated in the raw vegan lifestyle. He had sent me upon enrolling in his internship. I committed myself to the raw vegan lifestyle.

Ingredients available in the USA and Thailand. Ingredients include: wakame, seaweed salad, walnuts, sesame seeds, legumes and grains to sprout including: buckwheat groats. At Costco, raw cashews, cold-pressed olive oil, dried figs, avocados, and seeds are available. Ingredients to order from include: mesquite, supplements, and Irish moss. Also, I feel the benefits from homemade yogurt for the raw.

Efforts to Maintain a Raw Vegan Lifestyle

My new goal is to have only raw ingredients in my house. I'm bidding farewell to all the non-raw ingredients currently in my house, including Shin ramyun and mochi blocks. As I eat them, my cravings for the taste are satisfied, but my body is not happy with me! Whole plant-based food is ideal when consuming cooked foods. Although I'll occasionally eat cooked vegan food at restaurants and cooked vegan food people give me, I must take care. Highly processed oily cooked food causes cramps and bloating, more so since I've gone raw! Restaurants in Japan with a completely or partly raw food menu include: "Raw Food Lohas" in Sapporo and "Rainbow Raw Foods" in Shibuya.

My bento lunches have been less of a spectacle lately: a giant salad with nuts. Students think it's healthy, and some are so sweet to exclaim "Oishiiso!" *looks tasty!* Teachers inquire if I eat rice anymore, if I'm consuming enough protein, and so on. Preparing my lunch has received less focus because I'm not even hungry when lunch rolls around anymore. My morning smoothie is hearty and filling: a fistful of greens, rolled oats (not raw [sprouted raw oat groats are the only way to eat oats raw]), any extra vegetables around, chia seeds, ginger, turmeric, a nutritious oil like hemp or pumpkin seed oil, fresh or frozen fruit, and (usually raw sprouted rice) homemade yogurt. I'll experiment with various lunch dishes such as "burger patties" and wraps in the dehydrator, and "noodles" made from various vegetables with a spiralizer.

Finding much of what you already own isn't raw is an eye-opening experience. If the package or jar label doesn't clearly read "raw," then it's most likely not. This includes pickles, tahini, peanut butter, and other foods. Many products are roasted, including nori,

nuts, sesame seeds, sesame oil, and carob powder (an ethical chocolate substitute). Quaker rolled oats are steamed, all canned food and most food in jars is pasteurized, and all frozen packaged produce is steamed. My giant 25kg bag of soybeans is non-sprouting. It's a learning opportunity to make miso, tempeh, and tofu with this bounty of beans. I've dedicated myself to becoming at least 70% raw, which still leaves room for cooked food ventures.

Sprouting, an essential part of the raw vegan lifestyle, requires diligence and planning. Raw legumes and brown rice can be sprouted to release peak nutrition and ease digestion and assimilation. Soak them for a day in a jar, and after 24 hours, cover the jar with cheesecloth and secure it on with elastic bands. Rinse the legumes or brown rice inside with cool water, and tip it at an angle so the water can always drain out, sitting in a dish rack is best. For up to 5 days, until it visibly sprouts, rinse the legumes or rice twice a day. If rinsing is skipped once, it may dry out. If left out too long after sprouting, it will grow mold.

Suggested Items for a Raw Vegan Household

A hanging net dryer is an economical (but slow) way to air dry thinly sliced vegetables, fruit, or herbs. An Excalibur dehydrator is ideal to make crackers, wraps, "burgers," "pizza," and to dry produce fast while maintaining rawness. The cheaper dehydrators available in Japan have a hole in the middle, so making big wraps is impossible. A quality food processor and/or a Vitamix are also assets in the raw food kitchen. A mushroom log is recommended for a cheap steady supply of shiitake mushrooms. The log stays in a dark, cool damp place, and needs a quick shower twice a day. It will dry out and stop producing mushrooms if one or two showers are skipped. In that case, submerge it in a bucket of water for two days to "recharge" it. Plenty of jars and containers for pickling are



My green breakfast smoothie, in a Vitamix. You can and you can purée anything in it.

handy as well. Pickles are a convenient and tasty way to preserve vegetables and roots. They also pack a punch of flavor when added to salads, bowls and wraps.

On Sweeteners

The raw sweeteners I've found available are mesquite, which are ordered from abroad, dates, which are available at Costco, and raw honey, locally produced but not vegan. I aim for environmental consciousness and support of my local economy, so raw honey is the sounder decision in this light. Raw unprocessed stevia leaves are probably impossible to find in Japan. Dates are available at Costco but they are expensive so I use them sparingly. Mesquite experiments



n make hummus and peanut butter, for instance,

recently have produced slightly sweet, earthy results. I'd like to steer away from sugar, which means raw honey has become my choice sweetener.

On Sports

The body responds well to a high raw vegan lifestyle, with higher levels of sustained energy, and speedier recovery from exertions. My body responded well to my ultra-marathon training. I ran a full marathon distance on a hot day, then the next day I ran five energetic fast miles. I also recently completed my first ultramarathon since starting my raw vegan journey: 45 km, summiting seven mountains in 17 hours. My fuel was chia seed and puréed fruit pudding

squeeze pouches, homemade oat bars, fresh fruit and cherry tomatoes. I recovered within three days. The only feedback I've heard from an ultramarathon runner on raw veganism came from Scott Jurek's book "Eat and Run." He writes that a 100% raw vegan diet cannot supply enough calories to meet the demands of ultramarathons. He came to appreciate the freshness of raw vegetables though. I keep in mind that men burn more calories than women. As well, he is an elite athlete, and will burn through much more fuel in a 100 miler than me. I must research more, and learn through my own experiences.

To Wrap it Up

There's no right or wrong way to partake in raw veganism. It will benefit you the more you do it; your body will tell you so! It's tricky with the food labels and selection differing from your home country. Be patient and flexible. Keep it simple! For example: a hearty morning smoothie for breakfast, a giant salad with raw dressing and nuts for lunch, and anything for dinner. Experiment with different ingredients, substitute ingredients or make your own recipes. You will learn so much and introduce new habits into your life. Set your own rules or boundaries, and do what makes you comfortable. Enjoy living foods that will have you bubbling with energy and vitality!

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

The Mount Rokko Cannonball race in Kobe stands out as unique, unconventional and popular among trail runners in Japan. Japan seems like a very regimented place. But there are settings where rules seem to take a backseat to having fun. To set the tone of how informal and carefree this event is, the race director has enacted funny rules such as “Try not to complain too much,” “If you’re looking for love, write ‘recruitment’ on your bib,” “Don’t drink any alcohol you may regret,” and “Reach the finish however you want: miniature pony, wingsuit, hang glider, skateboard, bicycle, etc.”

(In reality, those methods are rare on the technical trails. 99.9% of participants use their own two feet.)

The race is a low-cost, no frills event. The absence of course markers is unique among Japanese races—participants use a map of the Mount Rokko trail system, a Strava route or Google Maps. The race director provides YouTube videos ([Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#)) that display the course from Suma Park to Shioheiji Shrine (near Takarazuka Station). In March, the 50 km event (the “Speed” run) starts on a Sunday at the shrine while in October, it starts from Suma Park.

Options for the race include racing as a pair or team—but everyone must finish

together. Participants may also start Saturday night from Suma and finish the following morning at the shrine. That run is called “Night Speed.” They may also choose the 100 km “Power” run, which includes turning around and continuing from the shrine back to Suma park. The longest race—the roughly 150 km “Rainbow”—starts Saturday morning at the shrine, goes onwards to Suma, then back to the shrine before returning to Suma for a Sunday evening finish. I ended up choosing—the supposedly 50, but maybe closer to 43-kilometer—“Speed,” which starts Sunday morning at the shrine and finishes in the afternoon at Suma Park.

Race Day Arrives!

After taking the first train to Takaraza Station, I followed the crowd on a long, steep incline to the shrine, which warmed me up that chilly, clear morning. Runners scattered around the start, resting or changing their clothes (The large number of women—an unusual sight for trail races in Japan—participating impressed me). Those who had started the previous night in Suma were arriving at the shrine



Cc

then. I acquired a bib and a couple gifts: a whistle and a cute sticker. Since this event occurred during the outbreak of the virus, the race director decided to proceed with an open start with no official finish times. Participants could freely start the race anytime in the morning to avoid crowding and give themselves more space among each other on the trail.

I wanted other runners to pass me throughout the race to help lead the way, so I started at seven a.m.—an hour earlier than most. Other runners were streaming by in the opposite direction, saying “*Ohayou gozaimasu!*” as they passed me. The first aid station had weiners, canned fruit salad, *onigiri* and other snacks. Runners were encouraged to donate to the aid stations they eat at since the volunteers purchased supplies out of their own pockets (I carried a pouch of money to donate 100-yen coins to the aid stations I helped myself at). The course brought us along a wide paved road, treating us to sweeping views of Kobe port.

The temperature hovered around 20 by 10:30 a.m., and sweat rolled off my face—it was obviously much warmer and more humid than in Hokkaido, where snow was still on the ground! The course splits a few times, where runners have a choice: ascend steps (the course presented an uphill climb for the first two hours), a trail to see a nice view of Kobe port, or stay on the road. I opted for the road, for I am clumsy and worry about tripping over roots. Running along a wide road, two other runners and I veered to the right.

But after a couple minutes, we noticed no other runners were ahead of us or behind us, and I checked my location on my phone. We had indeed taken the wrong



The Rokko Mountain Cannonball Run

Sheila Mulherin (Hokkaido)

Photo: Todd Diemer



Photo: Joe Kwong Tsz-Fung

way (we should have gone straight), but we could continue ahead and join the other runners. Perhaps we had added a km or two to the race, but at least, we were lost together and fixed our error swiftly.

Following a short visit to a rest stop with an aid station offering an impressive fresh fruit platter, we resumed the race and the course led us along a wide paved road while reverting to a technical incline crowded with day hikers. We then passed beautiful shrines and took in expansive views of Kobe and the port. Hikers and runners greeted me with a “*Konnichiwa*,” “Good Job,” or “*Otsukaresama desu*” as they passed. Slower runners and hikers quickly let me pass, and I did the same for

the faster runners. At times, runners nimbly and swiftly descended the mountain as if they were floating above the rocks and roots.

The course passed through residential neighborhoods between mountain hikes, where we zigzagged through the streets before turning back onto an ascending mountain trail. Twice, we went the wrong way and had to backtrack or pass through narrow ways to find the right route. We were encouraged to stop at a Lawson seven km before the finish, where I refreshed myself. (Many runners were eating ramen on the front pavement). Two English speakers caught me shortly afterwards, and we ran together for a km or two. I let

them go while climbing the next-to-last mountain, which proved the toughest part of the course. But I got a much-needed laugh at a tough point in the race from a poster featuring sexy women hung on the mountain for the Cannonball runners.

My feet became sensitive and tender, and my legs throbbed and wobbled as I ascended and descended. I relaxed, took a deep breath and refueled myself with the last of my supplies: sports drink, a fig cookie bar and *youkan*. I picked up the pace as I felt rejuvenated.

The last mountain consisted of ascending an incredibly long flight of stairs, followed by unsteadily descending endless stairs on the other side. With the end looming, I caught a much closer glimpse of the ocean, which lifted my spirits. The course brought me along a smooth wide dirt path and back into the city. I descended wide stone steps, but increasing my pace proved difficult with such long uneven steps.

Meanwhile, a spectator cheered enthusiastically and let me know the finish was near, which brought a huge smile to my face and reinvigorated me. But despite volunteers enthusiastically pointing the way to the finish, I apparently sprinted there the wrong way. I corrected my error by jumping over a curb to what wasn't a proper finish line, but space on the grass in front of a "Finish" poster above a robot. A volunteer took a photo of me, while fellow runners smiled, clapped for me, and shouted "*Otsukaresama deshita!*" "Good job!" "You've arrived!"

I had finished in 8 hours, 50 minutes, which brought out emphatic shouts of, "That's a fast time!" To which I replied, "That race kicked my butt!" My legs quivered for a while after the race. I took off my vest and my shoes. A huge hole had ripped in the heel of my right compression calf length toe sock, rendering the expensive bit of fabric *moyasu gomi*.

Runners who'd gotten lost or chatted with me during the race met up with me at the finish. We drank and ate snacks, took photos together and exchanged contact information before parting ways.

In Conclusion:

I'd hesitated entering this race (I had decided on it three days beforehand), as the course was unmarked and I worried about getting lost. I had made no plans in advance to run this race, but other runners reassured me the race would be fine, and I trusted them. During the event, my only goal was to complete the event before staff dismantled and packed away the finish. Yet kind runners nearby always helped me find the way. Last minute adventures are the best. If an adventure reveals itself to you, and you have the opportunity, throw yourself in the experience and see how it goes. Be open to whatever happens and enjoy the ride.

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

THE BENEFITS OF PEER PRESSURE:

MY EXPERIENCE WHITE WATER RAFTING IN THE OBOKE GORGE

Samantha Harris (Tokushima)

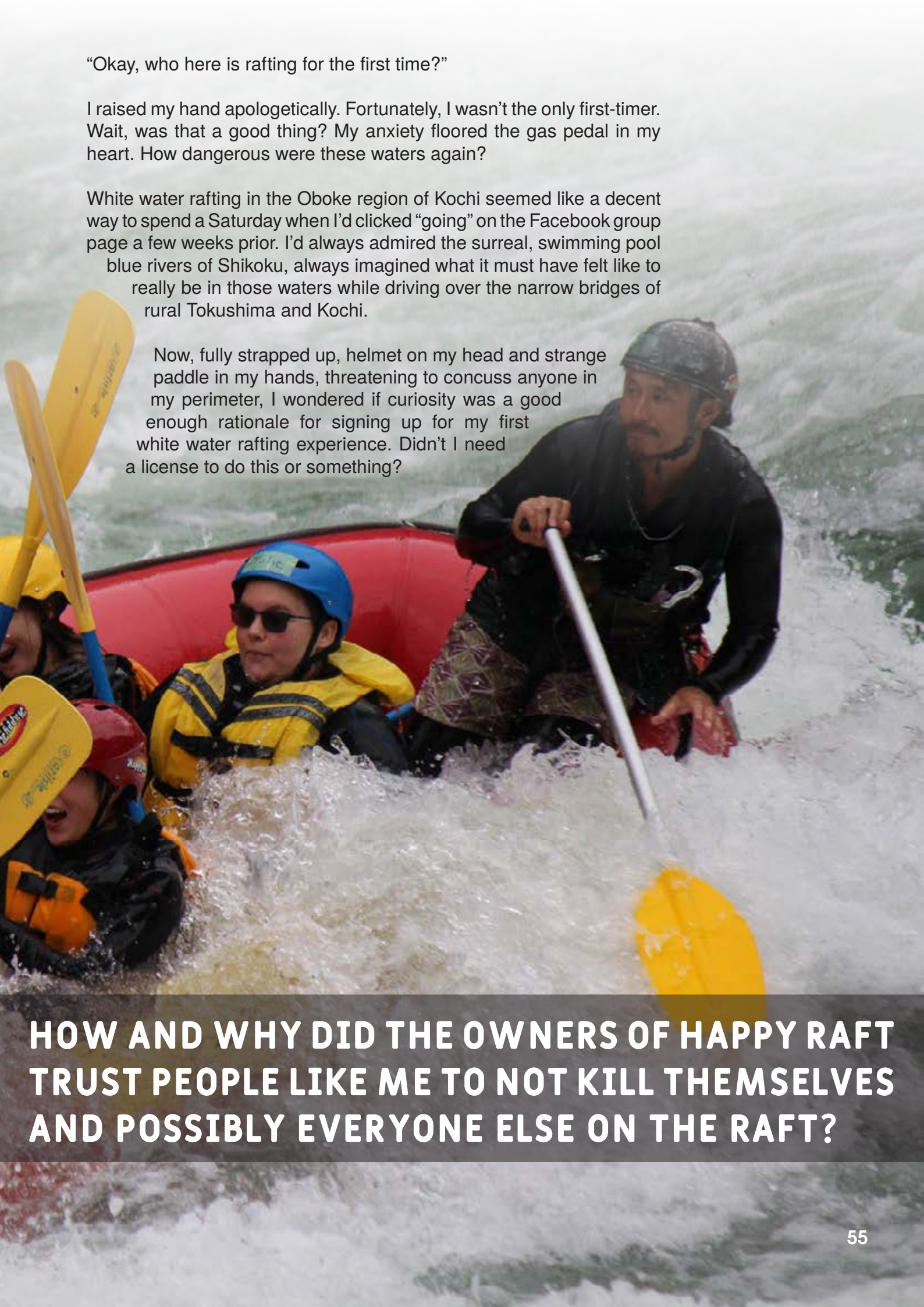


“Okay, who here is rafting for the first time?”

I raised my hand apologetically. Fortunately, I wasn't the only first-timer. Wait, was that a good thing? My anxiety floored the gas pedal in my heart. How dangerous were these waters again?

White water rafting in the Oboke region of Kochi seemed like a decent way to spend a Saturday when I'd clicked “going” on the Facebook group page a few weeks prior. I'd always admired the surreal, swimming pool blue rivers of Shikoku, always imagined what it must have felt like to really be in those waters while driving over the narrow bridges of rural Tokushima and Kochi.

Now, fully strapped up, helmet on my head and strange paddle in my hands, threatening to concuss anyone in my perimeter, I wondered if curiosity was a good enough rationale for signing up for my first white water rafting experience. Didn't I need a license to do this or something?



HOW AND WHY DID THE OWNERS OF HAPPY RAFT TRUST PEOPLE LIKE ME TO NOT KILL THEMSELVES AND POSSIBLY EVERYONE ELSE ON THE RAFT?



Let's just say, I'm not the kind of person you want on your apocalypse team. I'm not out of shape—I love to exercise. But I'm a panicker. Actually a diagnosed panicker with a genuine, bonafide panic disorder. On a lighter note, I firmly believe that if I were a cat, I'd be one of those cats who's constantly getting freaked out by their own tail and falling off tables in funny gifs.

I managed to keep the butterflies in my stomach fluttering at a pace I could cope with while the raft guides went over what to do if you fell off the raft, what to do if someone else fell off the raft, what to do if—god forbid—your leg got stuck under a rock and it twisted and. . . . Just look at the water, I told myself. Look at the pretty blue water! Sure is blue. You paid ¥9,000 to be here. Don't freak out.

Then it was time to actually get in the raft and start the ride. Suddenly, I was eleven years old again, on my junior high school chorus field trip to Busch Gardens, Williamsburg, waiting in line to ride the Big Bad Wolf, my first real roller coaster. The magic of peer pressure convinced me to sit in one of those death carts, and I ended up having a great time.

They say history repeats itself, and it turns out, the magic of peer pressure works whether you're a preteen or a twenty-something adult. I had a great time. One of the best times I've had since coming to Tokushima over one year ago for the JET Programme.





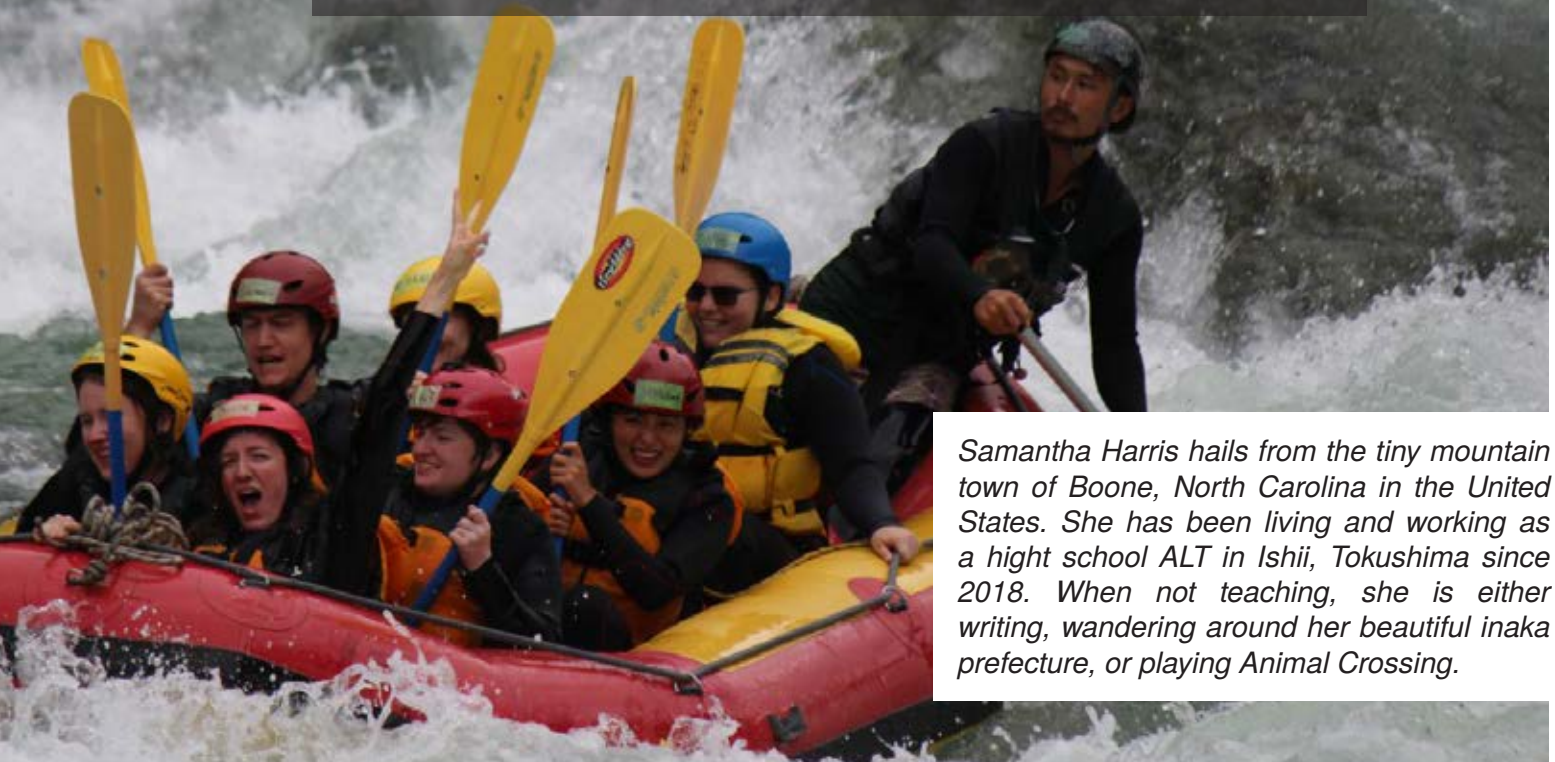
Our experience wasn't without its little ticks. I was, of course, the first one to hold the paddle incorrectly, inspiring our little rafting group to dub ourselves "Team T-Grip" as a reminder to FIRMLY GRASP the handle. I stayed on constant alert after my first mistake, constantly checking my form, not wanting to be the reason our raft tipped over. I held my breath and gripped the ropes for dear life on the first few rapids. It was like being on a roller coaster without a safety belt.

There were enough calm moments to break up the chaos of the rapids. That is, until our rafting group—a mix of Tokushima and Hiroshima JETs—decided to declare war on each other's rafts, turning the river into a hazardous battleground. Paddle splashing led to pulling and pushing one another overboard, which eventually led to outright kidnapping and raft mutiny. I felt myself being pulled backwards by an enemy's paddle more than once. There were winners and losers but no casualties.

By the end of the day, just about every orifice on my body was full of river water. My knuckles were rubbed raw from hitting the ropes on the raft, but I had no bruises, no wounds. I'd made it out alive. More than alive, I was happy.

Looking back, I couldn't believe how quickly I'd gone from nervous and doubtful to joyful and carefree, talking to strangers as if they were lifelong friends, cursing familiar faces for pulling me overboard and later retaliating with a splash of cold river water. I even went to an onsen afterwards, something my anxiety usually talks me out of.

I can say for certain that this experience made me braver and more relaxed, two unexpected but welcome side effects. If you have the chance to go white water rafting in Oboke, I highly recommend it. The river was even used as the location of the 2017 World Rafting Championships! Who knows how long we'll be able to go out and appreciate nature's gifts? Even if you have the temperament of a cat frightened by its tail, you could have an unforgettably positive experience in one of the most beautiful places on Earth.



Samantha Harris hails from the tiny mountain town of Boone, North Carolina in the United States. She has been living and working as a high school ALT in Ishii, Tokushima since 2018. When not teaching, she is either writing, wandering around her beautiful inaka prefecture, or playing Animal Crossing.

COMMUNITY AND TRAVEL



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"Our capacity to make peace with another person and with the world depends very much on our capacity to make peace with ourselves"

— Thich Nhat Hanh

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Clarissa Combe

"There's no such thing as the unknown—only things temporarily hidden, temporarily not understood." —

Captain Kirk





THE MICHINOKU COASTAL TRAIL

Lush Nature,
Unforgettable Food,
and Lessons from Disaster

Anna Thomas
(Shibata Town, Miyagi Prefecture)

In 2015, I got word of a new 1000 km long-distance hiking course being made in Tohoku. Tohoku's Pacific coast was seriously damaged by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami that caused the death of almost 20,000 people, and this "Michinoku Coastal Trail" was created to attract people to the coastline to enjoy its nature, history, culture and cuisine, as well as to meet local people and learn about natural disasters. Previously, I'd spent most of my time at the coast as a post-tsunami volunteer, but this was my chance to enjoy these areas as a tourist! I've hiked bits and pieces over the years, and in this past year, I've section-hiked 700 km of the trail. I've done English translations for the MCT for years and now work part-time at the trail's headquarters in Natori, Miyagi. In short, I love this trail, and I'm here to invite you to come when you can and enjoy it for yourself.

top: Samuraiishi Rock in Kuji





“Hiking this trail has been more about becoming comfortable with who I am already and working within my limits.”

Boulder washed up by tsunami in Karakuwa, Kesennuma

GIFTS THE MCT HAS GIVEN ME

When I started section-hiking the trail, I expected a journey to “find myself” and push beyond my limits, but I found that that was not necessarily what was on offer. Hiking this trail has been more about becoming comfortable with who I am already and working within my limits. I am the same person I was when I started my journey, with a couple of extra tools up my sleeve.

One tool is camping. I had never expected to even tolerate camping. In fact, my first night camping on the MCT was miserable. It rained all night. I lived on nuts and bread because I had expected a campground store that wasn't there. In the morning, I flung my sleeping bag across the empty campground in frustration because it wouldn't fit back into the microscopic bag it came from. Now, I've grown to love it. With a tent, you sleep in the open air, hearing

the sounds of waves, ducks having an evening quack, or the occasional shrieking deer, and yet you're protected from the less pleasant parts of the outdoors like mosquitoes and rain.

Another tool I gained on the trail may someday help save my life. It was the accumulated effect of what we'd heard about the 2011 tsunami that led my husband and I to evacuate to higher ground during Typhoon 19 last year. At the time, I wanted to deny there was an emergency, to believe that our area was safe because it had never seriously flooded before. Those thoughts reminded me of stories we'd heard on the coast, and I remembered the moral of all those stories: we needed to err on the safe side and act to save ourselves now. Possibly we would feel foolish later, but feeling foolish is always better than dying. (Our apartment suffered no damage, but we made the right choice. Some houses in our area were flooded past the first floor.)

WHAT BRINGS ME BACK

While I've benefited a lot from the trail as a person, I don't return again and again for an ongoing education in disaster safety.

I go because it's pretty. About a quarter of the trail goes through a national park called Sanriku *Fukko* (Reconstruction) National Park. The iconic scenery of this area includes jagged rocks, turquoise blue waters, and green pines along the zigzag coastline. The trail also goes through a variety of other landscapes: tranquil rows of houses with knickknacks and potted plants, vast flat fields, thick forests, and mysterious misty islands.

I go for the food and the hot springs. I regularly have intrusive daydreams about this octopus rice bowl and crepe lunch I had in Rikuzentakata. Once, I had this boiled crab that was so good that part way through eating it not only did I completely forget about table manners, but I also stopped caring whether or not I was eating the shell. Usually, after a hike I'm hungry enough that eating a cardboard box would probably taste good, so having top-shelf seafood washed down by some cold beer? Absolute heaven.



I go for the people. The old fellows managing the campgrounds I stayed at were always wordlessly handing me handfuls of candy or cans of juice. In especially outgoing areas, anyone from a construction worker on a break to a gentleman enjoying fishing with his poodle would sidle over to chat about my hike and recommend sights. I've also been given a ride in a police car in Onagawa (not that kind of ride!) and a free place to stay in Ofunato.

Finally, I go to witness history: another snapshot in time as Tohoku continues to recover from the tsunami. The barren landscapes of wrecked buildings and hills of rubble I remember from volunteering have already mercifully disappeared and transformed into places with clean sidewalks, restaurants, and train stations. Progress towards recovery continues. Today's rows of saplings will someday become forests. Bare patches of construction are waiting to become shopping streets, parks or hotels.

left: Octopus rice bowl at Senkaen in Rikuzentakata





津波
ここまで
来たの
る

*"The tsunami
came up to here"*

SUGGESTED COURSES

As a starting point for planning, here are two courses based on hikes I've done. Each one is about a week long, most are under 20 kilometers per day, and the start/end points for each day are either accessible by train/bus or are near several places to stay.

Hachinohe to Kuji

Day 1: Same Station to Oja Station, 19 km (add an extra two days here to go up Mount Hashikami if you make a reservation at the campground).

Day 2: Oja Station to Taneichi Seaside Park, 10 km.

Day 3: Taneichi Seaside Park to Rikuchu-Noda Station, 22 km.

Day 4: Rikuchu-Noda Station to Kitasamuraihama Campground, 11 km (don't attempt the river crossing, use the detour).

Day 5: Kitasamuraihama Campground to Kuji Station, 20 km.

Day 6: Kuji Station to Kosode Ama Center, 14 km (return to Kuji Station by bus).

Ofunato to Kesenuma

Day 1: Sanriku Station to Ryori Station, 14 km.

Day 2: Ryori Station to Ryori Station (walk around the peninsula), to Rikuzen-Akazaki Station, 23 km.

Day 3: Rikuzen-Akazaki Station to Goishi Coast Campground, 17 km.

Day 4: Goishi Coast Campground to mid-Hirota Peninsula (stay on the peninsula or take a bus to Otomo Station), 19 km.

Day 5: Mid-Hirota Peninsula to Wakinosawa Station, 19 km.

Day 6: Wakinosawa Station to Karakuwa Sogoshisho-mae Bus Stop, 21 kilometers (bus to a campground or local inn), 21 km.

Day 7: Karakuwa Sogoshisho-mae Bus Stop to Karakuwa Sogoshisho-mae Bus Stop (walk around the peninsula), 20 km.

Day 8: Karakuwa Sogoshisho-mae Bus Stop to Kyukamura Kesenuma Oshima/Kesenuma Oshima Campground in Oshima Island, 14 km.

TIPS

Get the free paper maps.

These are in Japanese, but you can mark them in English as necessary using the online English PDFs. Get the [maps sent to you](#) via postal mail to addresses within Japan, or get them in person at the Natori Trail Center and other facilities along the route. New maps should be released in autumn 2020. These will cost money but will be much more durable and contain updated information in Japanese and English.

Decide your schedule.

How much time will you have? What experiences appeal to you? How many kilometers per day will you walk? (Remember: hypothetical kilometers are easier than actual kilometers!) Once you've got your general parameters down, contact the [Natori Trail Center](#) or connect with other hikers in the [unofficial English Facebook group](#) to see which courses would be a good fit.

Arrange your lodging.

An unofficial map showing lodging information is [here](#). This might be one of the most difficult parts of planning since lodging is scarce in some areas. Having trouble? Try basing yourself in cities with more places to stay, like Hachinohe, Kuji, Miyako, Kamaishi and Ishinomaki, and do nearby day hikes. If you prefer camping, you can base yourself at a campground near a train station instead.

Prepare your gear.

At a minimum, this means maps, food and water, hiking clothes, a bear bell, a compass, rain gear, and a cellphone.





Get the downloadable GPS files.

Some sections still have little official signage, so along with paper maps and a compass, I highly recommend using the official GPS files with an app. That way, you'll be able to double-check where the trail route is related to where you are in real-time. For apps, I recommend Gaia GPS, which is free and available for iPhones and Android.

Check Natori Trail Center's website for advisories.

Don't skip this step! There are enough detours due to construction or typhoon damage scattered along the trail to throw a wrench into your plans, and many advisories are important for safety. Go to the [advisory page](#) and choose the area you plan to visit. You can also look at the detours in map form [here](#).

THE TRAIL ISN'T GOING ANYWHERE

Any time you're able to visit, the Michinoku Coastal Trail will be here, ready to welcome you with rich nature, kind people, tasty food, and wisdom born from hardship that could change your life!

Anna is originally from Oregon in the United States and has enjoyed life in Tohoku for 10 years. She enjoys knitting, bird watching, programming, and (thanks to the MCT) camping.

[Section hiking blog](#)



Stairway to Enlightenment

Bridging Past and Present
Along the Kumano Kodō

Sara Atwood
(Kobe, Hyogo Prefecture)

In these past few months, with the coronavirus rampaging around the globe, travel seems like a faraway dream for most people. While we currently lack the opportunity to travel abroad, domestic travel is still a possibility if proper precautions are taken. Social distancing is completely feasible along the well-worn paths of the Kumano Kodō, where pilgrims have walked for over 1,000 years to purify the mind, body, and soul. This escape from the doldrums of quarantine and stress of the pandemic could be just what the doctor ordered.



Wakayama Prefecture

“It is one of only two pilgrimage routes in the world that has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site...”

What is the Kumano Kodō?

The Kumano Kodō is a series of pilgrimage routes located in the Kii Peninsula in western Japan. It is one of only two pilgrimage routes in the world that has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with the other being the Camino de Santiago (Way of St. James) in Spain. Multiple pilgrimage routes criss-cross the peninsula, though the most popular is the Nakahechi Route in Wakayama Prefecture, which was primarily used by the Imperial family on pilgrimages from Jonan-gu Shrine in Kyoto to the Kumano Sanzan—the three grand shrines of the region—from the 10th century onwards.

However, with the rise of the shogunate, Imperial pilgrimages came to an end around the 13th century. But pilgrimage culture in Japan, especially in the Kii Mountain Range, had already been well established. There was an overall decline in pilgrimages in the late 19th century, but the 1990s saw a resurgence in their popularity. After being recognised as a World Heritage Site in 2004, the area saw a dramatic increase in both domestic and international pilgrims.



[Ancient Stairs of the Kumano Kodo]

Gotta Collect ‘Em All— Ofuda, Goshuin, and Stamp Rallies

For centuries, Japanese pilgrims have purchased souvenirs from shrines and temples to bring back as mementos of their trip, symbols of their religious devotion, or talismans to protect themselves from various calamities. There are many types, but the two most common are ofuda and goshuin. Recently, stamp rallies have become another popular way of recording visits to famous places. It is possible to collect all of these along the Kumano Kodō, though I honestly didn't know much about them before my trip.



[Ofuda from Nachi Taisha]

There are two kinds of ofuda talismans: the first is received from a Shinto shrine and bears the name of the shrine and/or its *kami* (god). People often keep them on their Shinto altars. The second protects against natural disasters, cures diseases, and more. You can get these from either Shinto shrines or Buddhist temples and place them in different areas of your home.

Goshuin are special, hand-written calligraphic seals collected by visitors to shrines and temples usually kept in a designated *goshuinchō* book. When visiting these sacred spaces, pilgrims would demonstrate their piety by giving offerings. In exchange, they would receive a goshuin as a physical record of having visited the temple or shrine. The practice of collecting goshuin has continued through the centuries and is now popular with visitors of all ages, religions, and ethnicities.

“Goshuin are special calligraphic seals collected by visitors to shrines and temples usually kept in a designated *goshuinchō* book.

Modern-day stamp rallies are incredibly popular in Japan, with many being organised by railway companies, local government offices, and major tourist sites, including temples and shrines. Visitors collect various stamps associated with an area or event, and if you collect

them all, you can often win prizes. No one really knows when or how these rallies began, but they could be linked to collecting goshuin. While many religious centres have their own tourist stamps, it is incredibly important to put them in their own designated books. Goshuin are considered sacred, so if you fill your goshuinchō with any other stamps, monks and priests will often refuse to write any more goshuin in your book.



cial, hand-written
collected by visitors
mples, usually kept
goshuinchō book.”

Traversing the Kumano Kodō's Nakahechi Route

In November 2018, some friends invited me on a hike along the Nakahechi Route during the upcoming spring holidays, and I jumped at the opportunity. I was new to the JET Programme and had always planned on doing a pilgrimage in Japan, so this was the perfect chance to check something off the bucket list.

The planned trip was a three-day hike from Hongū Taisha to Nachi Taisha, which is roughly 30 kilometres across the Kii Mountain Range. On March 29, 2019, our group of five met up in Osaka and took the JR Kisei Line along the Wakayama coast to Kii-Tanabe Station. After having a quick lunch, we stopped by the local tourism office and picked up some stamp rally booklets before running to catch our bus.



[Goshuin from the Nakahechi Route]



[Waroda-ishi]

About two and a half hours later, we reached Hongū Taisha. We climbed the steps to the shrine and paid our respects to the kami. I bought my first goshuinchō—a limited edition marking the 15th anniversary of Kumano Kodō becoming a World Heritage Site—and, while waiting for the shrine priestess to complete my goshuin, I got the first rally stamp in my booklet.

From there, we followed the riverbank, walking under the world's largest *torii* at Oyunohara and up into the mountains. The first leg of the hike was a very short, yet steep, two kilometres, but luckily, we each grabbed a walking stick from the base of the trail before beginning the climb. We walked by statues of Jizō, a bodhisattva often associated with travellers, and through forests with trees stretching as far and as high as the eye could see, eventually arriving at our hostel in the small *onsen* town of Yunomine. After eating dinner and relaxing in the onsen, we crawled into bed.

Bright and early the following morning, we took a 30-minute bus ride to Ukegawa, where the hike began in earnest. We walked roughly 13 kilometres along winding trails through the mountain's ancient forests, overlooking the

incredible views of the valleys below, to the small town of Koguchi. It took about seven hours, including a lunch break and stamp collecting for our rally from the wooden stands at various landmarks along the way. Like the day before, upon reaching the hostel and relaxing in another onsen, we crashed early to prepare for the next day.

The third day was probably the most difficult. We were already shattered from our long hike the day before and had to psych ourselves up to trek another 14 kilometres to Nachi Taisha. This part of the hike contains the highest elevation point on the trail and some of the steepest, longest stairs I've ever seen in my life. It is gruelling, but there are also many historical places to enjoy along the way, like the ruins of Edo period teahouses and the *Warodai-shi*. This sacred stone has three Sanskrit symbols carved into its face, each representing one of the main Kumano deities: Kannon (Bodhisattva of Mercy), Yakushi (Buddha of Medicine), and Amida (Buddha of Compassion). It is said that they meet here from time to time to relax and drink tea. We paused here to do the same, so I'd like to think we had one big tea party together.

When we finally began the descent to Nachi Taisha, we were rewarded with a breathtaking view of the ocean. Stumbling the rest of the way down the mountain, we arrived at our destination after about nine hours and just 15 minutes before the area closed for the evening. We quickly took a commemorative photo together and then rushed off to collect our remaining stamps and goshuin. After realising that it would be impossible to collect them all in such a short time, we decided to return the next morning instead.

This proved to be the best decision, as we could leisurely enjoy the scenery and atmosphere. We spent time taking in the views, snapping dozens of photos, buying *omiyage*, and collecting those final

stamps. I also bought a special ofuda designed to bring good luck and ward off illness, which is now hanging in my *genkan*. When we finally wrapped up, we headed to Kii-Katsuura Station for the four-hour train ride back to Osaka, where we went our separate ways.

Even though the hike was long and difficult, the overwhelming sense of taking part in something spiritual made all the exertion worth it. Collecting ofuda, goshuin, and stamps transformed my ordinary hike into an enlightening contemporary pilgrimage, where I truly felt like an active participant in history. I hope that one day soon I will be able to walk the Camino de Santiago in Spain as well. If you collect the main rally stamps along both UNESCO World Heritage pilgrimage routes, you can receive a special certificate recognising your efforts and granting you the status of "Dual Pilgrim."

Along the Kumano Kodō, your weary heart and soul are renewed by the sounds of chirping birds, rustling leaves, and flowing rivers. You may struggle sometimes along the way, but pilgrimages aren't supposed to be easy. They're about connecting to something larger than yourself and following in the footsteps of the centuries of pilgrims before you, while leaving footsteps of your own for others to one day follow.



[Completed Nakahechi Stamp Rally]



[Nachi Taisha Overlook]



Sara Atwood is a third-year ALT at a senior high school in Hyogo Prefecture. She has a MA in East Asian Art History from SOAS, University of London. She is especially interested in Japanese religious art history and women's pilgrimage in the Edo Period. Her hobbies include playing video games, reading fantasy and science fiction novels, studying Japanese, and hiking. Instagram: @klfshepard

WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

My name is Simon Yates, I'm from the UK. I came to Japan straight out of university at the age of 23 and went to Japan thinking it would be a stopgap for one or two years. That was 27 years ago, and I've been here in Kansai ever since. In my final year at university, I actually applied and didn't get into the JET Programme and ended up coming over here with NOVA when it was still Japan's biggest chain of private language schools. I worked in the branches and in the main office for a total of 14 years until the initial incarnation of the company went bankrupt. These days, I'm a Business English trainer at a multinational chemical company in Osaka.

Over the last few months, I've been producing a daily English-language summary of Japan's COVID-19 related news, which I post to my timeline and share with the Covid19 Japan Discussion Group on Facebook. It's a quick read with screenshots of headlines, official infection numbers, and other important details mostly taken from the morning's NHK TV bulletin. It brings people up to speed with what's going on and gives them an idea of what Japanese people are hearing from their mainstream media. My process for this is pretty rudimentary. I usually get up


COMMUNITY HEROES SPOTLIGHT

Simon Yates (Osaka)

at 6:45 every day and grab screenshots from NHK's Kansai news bulletin at 6:53 and the national bulletin at 7 a.m. I don't even have a TV recorder; I just take pictures of the TV in real time with my phone. Then I upload pictures and caption them with a translation of the text or quotes. Sometimes I add background info for overseas friends, and I put in the occasional comment or opinion of my own.

Overall, people have been extremely positive about what I'm doing and say that it's been a very helpful service for the foreign community here—people who are busy, people who don't speak Japanese, people who don't have TVs! Others like the humour I inject and say that it makes the often-frustrating news easier to digest. I don't go out of my way to be funny, but I'm quite dry and cynical by nature, which is entertaining I guess.

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO DO THIS PROJECT?



"I don't even have a TV recorder; I just take pictures of the TV in real time with my phone."

Starting the Japan COVID-19 news summary wasn't really a conscious decision. I've been working from home and without my usual three-hour daily commute, I had time to follow the news closely, share articles and website links, and comment on things as I saw them. There was info I was seeing on Japanese TV that wasn't being picked up in the English-language media, especially some quite interesting graphs and infographics. On the

newspaper sites, graphs and charts often don't make it into the English-language articles because the text in a jpeg or png file can't be copied and pasted into a translation engine and then replaced. You have to reproduce the whole graphic from scratch. So they often just don't bother even though these are the quickest and clearest ways for the reader to get information and see trends.

So I started picking stuff up off the TV more often, just one or two pictures with comments at the beginning. By the middle of April, my news summary had basically morphed into its current form of a daily report with 20-30 screenshots. I've been at this for over 120 days straight now. I was kind of looking forward to giving it a rest once the State of Emergency was lifted, but the seeds of the second wave were already sprouting even as Tokyo lifted the remnants of their first wave restrictions. So infections are rising again and I'm still chained to my keyboard every morning.

I try to keep my posts upbeat, and I would hate to be accused of bashing the Japanese as a people. However, looking back, a lot of what I wrote in April and May was underpinned by frustration with the government for what I saw as a failure to prepare, particularly in terms of protecting frontline medical workers. I felt that the country had a chance to learn lessons from China, mainland Europe, the UK, and the USA before things started to get serious here and missed some opportunities to do so. In the end, we avoided a collapse of the medical system, but I'd say the jury is still out on whether that was due to good policy and leadership, pure dumb luck, or factors still unknown.

WHAT LESSONS HAVE YOU LEARNED ALONG THE WAY?

In the middle of a pandemic, I am very lucky to be where I am doing what I do. I have been able to keep working from home and look after my daughter even when the schools were closed. I'm also very happy that I have been able to do something for the community in that time too.

The Japanese government could have done better and could still be doing better, but when you look at other countries, they could be doing a lot worse too. In my opinion, the absence of an effective political opposition over the last few years has been unfortunate.

The Japanese people have once again shown remarkable patience, forbearance, and cooperation in shouldering the social and financial burden of ad-hoc requests from the government.

"The Japanese people have once again shown remarkable patience, forbearance, and cooperation..."

Japan's international reputation for cutting edge technology has been hurt by reports of the country's fax machines, paper-based administration and an initial resistance to remote work and schooling. But the bidets are still world beaters.

Japan has an underclass living in poverty. Living here, I had bought into the idea that Japan is a largely middle-class society without extremes of poverty. However, this pandemic has flagged up a considerable number of vulnerable people who are being overlooked by the government and protected by a patchwork of NPOs.

WHAT OTHER THINGS ARE YOU DOING DURING THESE TIMES?

Not a lot really. Being at home all day rather than leaving at 7 a.m. and coming back home at 8 p.m. has allowed me to do more cooking and cleaning, do things around the house, and spend more time with my daughter.

My son is studying in the UK and we haven't seen him for a year. The original plan was for him to come back for a month this summer but there was too much uncertainty about immigration and quarantine. So it looks like we won't see him 'til Christmas maybe. It's been hard on the family but we have Skype, Line, and email so we can keep in touch and video chat.

ANY MESSAGE YOU WOULD LIKE TO LEAVE OUR READERS WITH?

It's tough being in a foreign country in a crisis, especially one that may require you to interact with the medical system, but there is information and support available out there. Stay safe, try to keep things in perspective, and reach out for the help you need.

As one small part of that, feel free to follow my posts on Facebook (search for Simon Yates, or Kansaimon) and/or join the Covid19 Japan Discussion group.

But if you need serious help or counseling, then please check in with **TELL**, for free counseling and support in English.

Simon Yates is a business English trainer at the Osaka headquarters of a German multinational chemical company. In his free time, he plays guitar in cover bands in Kobe and Osaka but often wonders why he loves doing something he is not very good at. As age catches up with him, he also wonders whether his Impostor Syndrome was actually just sporadic recognition of the Dunning-Kruger Effect. There may be a novel in him somewhere, but right now he'll settle for catching up on his To Do list.

Anxiously gripping my cell phone, I waited for a call that would determine the next chapter of my life. The sudden vibration in my hands caused my heart to race.

“Hello,” I said, trying to remain calm.

“Hello, Christian. Thank you for your willingness to support our charity organization. Unfortunately, we regret to inform you that we currently aren’t accepting any volunteers.”

After being declined for the seventh time this week, I felt defeated. The burden of rejection had become frustrating, hopelessness sinking in as opportunities faded away.

My last resort was collaborating with the U.S. Department of State to develop an independent volunteer project called Project Hiro, but this seemed unlikely considering the number of times I was rejected. Could you believe they were the first to accept my offer of local volunteer work? Now I am working on a project to support thousands of children and teachers throughout the prefecture of Yamaguchi.

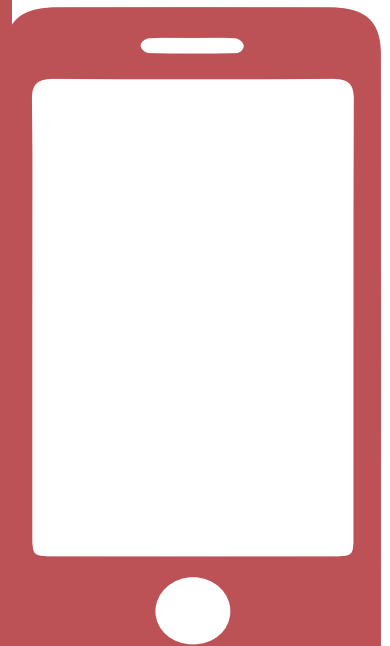
My name is Christian, and I would like to share the arduous road I took to protect my community from COVID-19.

NO TRIAL, ALL ERROR

Initially, my focus in developing Project Hiro wasn’t to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. As a humanitarian, I pursue various activities to support my community while simultaneously promoting international exchange. I acquired

“Hello”

I said, trying to remain calm.



this characteristic through the endless support I received by the faculty of my Japanese Studies program throughout high school and university. They would always go above and beyond to serve the community, and so I was inspired to seek opportunities to do my part regardless of where I am in the world.

Despite these good intentions, my efforts were continuously declined. I tried to volunteer in a plethora of festivals, host a charity dodgeball tournament for starving children, and help at an orphanage. Each offer was rejected. I even had meetings with representatives from the culture and welfare institution in my city to learn the process of volunteering. Those meetings at best gave me potential opportunities for the future. However, uncertainty for that future grew as cases of COVID-19 began to spread throughout Japan.

VOLUNTEERING AGAINST ALL ODDS

*Christian Palmer
(Yamaguchi)*

In March 2020, a few people in my city tested positive for COVID-19. Living conditions became dire due to sudden laws passed by the Japanese government. Just as I was finally growing accustomed to life in Japan, normalcy was suddenly robbed from everyone in the city. Worst of all, I noticed signs that my city was unprepared to handle these changes. There were shortages in hand sanitizer, children were reusing masks made from paper towels, and COVID-19 prevention knowledge was insufficient. I knew I could no longer wait for an opportunity to be handed to me. Taking immediate action was the only solution.

MASKS OF COMPASSION

A colleague and I created emergency mask kits with our own money for children at risk. We managed to distribute them to schools we work at before they were ordered to close. As two foreigners being overly thrilled to volunteer in the countryside, many people were suspicious of our true intent. However, by utilizing our positive relationship with our coworkers, it was easy to convince our boss to allow us to create our own mask kits for students in need. I still remember seeing tears of joy run down a teacher's cheek as I handed her a stack of mask kits. It was then I felt the importance of being a leader for

the sake of the needy. It takes a great amount of character to help others during a crisis, but there is never an excuse to gamble with the lives of other people. It is this philosophy that motivated my colleague and I to create Project Hiro, which is a play on words between the Japanese first name “Hiro” and the English word “Hero.”

WAITING WASN'T AN OPTION

Shortly after our emergency mask-kit project, my colleague was presented an opportunity to work with the U.S. Department of State, utilizing their COVID-19 Rapid Response

grant to fund Project Hiro. Our goal was to distribute high-quality reusable masks to all elementary and junior high schools in our city, create an easy-to-understand children's guide with our unique

character, and record a COVID-19 video guide with the help of a US diplomat, the superintendent of education, doctors, and many more. Between my fluency in Japanese and my colleague's medical expertise, we were able to produce a variety of content directed toward all ages. Although this project is still in progress, we have already received endless appreciation and support from the community. Most importantly, however, I am finally in the position I have been striving for—to support anyone in need.

“I still remember seeing tears of joy run down a teacher's cheek.”

“...doing what you think is right instead of waiting...”

It was easy falling into the trap of waiting for the opportunity to support my community. When I stopped asking for permission to help and decided to do what I thought was right, people

seemed to appreciate me and I was able to assist those in need. By doing so, I was granted more opportunities and developed the social proof necessary to do more projects in the future. Through all

these interactions, I was able to bring my community closer together and feel more like a contributing member of society. For anyone unsure of stepping out of their comfort zone, I recommend envisioning your goal, creating a concrete plan, and doing what you think is right instead of waiting for someone to contact you as I did.

Christian Palmer is an Assistant Language Teacher in Yamaguchi from California. He likes to train in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu in his free time. He plans to pursue a career utilizing both Japanese and English in the future.

CONTRIBUTING TO CONNECT

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

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

ARTICLES

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

SPOTLIGHT

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

PHOTOS

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

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