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AJET

Issue No. 102 March 2021

Business & Language, Arts & Culture, Lifestyle, Community

CONNECT



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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Hellooooo everyone!

I hope you are all doing well and weren't affected by the recent earthquakes in the Tōhoku region. Goes to show how natural disaster-prone Japan really is and these things can catch people really off guard.

Thankfully, in the last month my life has been a lot less *offline*, so I do not have YouTube intros ringing in my head. If you regularly read my "Letter from the Editor" would you know that I returned to New Zealand in late January. I am still readjusting to a (mostly) COVID-19-free world. But alert levels can change drastically too.

I attended Auckland's 2021's [Big Gay Out](#) which had fifteen thousand people in attendance and then at midnight Auckland was slammed into a three-day lockdown. Luckily, the contact tracing has been efficient and speedy, so a lot of the anxiety I had while in Japan has been eased by how quickly the government moves in order to combat the invisible enemy of COVID-19. It's amazing that a year later, there are still a substantial amount of CONNECT articles that are related to COVID-19.. It goes to show how widespread the waves of this pandemic are and our contributors still have plenty to write about.

My top picks for the March issue are: Three friends from Tōkyō try out a recipe book that show-cases wild plants found in Japan in "Eating Wild"; The cancellation of the 2020 Tōkyō Olympics is still on the cards, but why can't Japan seem to admit defeat in the face of a pandemic? Read about it in "The True Cost of COVID-19 and the 2020 Summer Games"; A previous ALT gives us an interesting insight into what it's like to work in the tourism industry in 2021 and its fight for survival in "The Travel Industry in This COVID-19 World".

That's all from me now! Short and sweet. As always take care and rejoice at seeing the peaks of spring in the coming weeks!

Alice R.

Alice Ridley  
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*"It's like a business networking event in my eyes." — a friend talking about a recent popular music event we attended.*

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*"You're hiding on the FM radio. I sing along just to sing my thoughts at someone." Joji, "Daylight"*

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

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*"11th form. Dead Calm." — Giyu Tomioka (ぎゆう), Demon Slayer*

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*"I must have flowers, always and always." — Claude Monet*

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*"Are you happy?" — a cat-themed coffee mug from Daiso, which I affectionately call my "existential crisis mug"*

### Day Bulger

*"Whether you win or lose, looking back and learning from your experience is a part of life." — All Might, "My Hero Academia"*

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*"It's not 'impossible', it's just 'hard'!" — Bokuto Koutarou, "Haikyuu!!"*



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*"A man is not called wise because he talks and talks again; but if he is peaceful, loving and fearless then he is in truth called wise."*  
— Buddha

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*"When we hate our enemies, we are giving them power over us: power over our sleep, our appetites, our blood pressure, our health, and our happiness."* — Dale Carnegie

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# FIVE TIPS FOR INNOVATIVE LESSON PLANNING

## Nate Olson (Tōkyō)

Before the spring semester starts, what goals have you set for yourself? Perhaps you want to try something new or develop aspects of what you're already doing in the classroom. Or, maybe you'd like a sneak peek of the upcoming policy changes in the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) national curriculum guidelines or Course of Study ([学習指導要領](#) *gakushū shidō yōryō*). In any case, here are five tips that will help you stay ahead of the curve in your lesson planning.

## 1. CONTENT

Teaching language always involves some level of teaching content. Rather than just focusing on communication and culture, MEXT recommends that teachers utilize subject content in a manner that stimulates student interest. Teachers should link their lessons with that of other subjects, such as social studies, physical sciences, art, music, and physical education. For example, if a topic about history is being covered in the lesson, you can give students more information about the event or surrounding events. If a certain city or country is being referenced in an example sentence, you can show students the Street View of that city on Google Maps or a short video that shows a slice of life in that area of the world. The point is, look for every opportunity to deepen the content.

If you have freedom in your lesson planning, don't be afraid to go beyond the textbook topic and personalize your lessons. Explore what you think students might find interesting or relevant to their daily lives and use your expertise and passion to create a cross-curricular connection. This could be a subject you studied in university, such as history, science, literature—you might

even partner up with another subject teacher at your school to find creative ways in which you can bring English into their class or bring their subject into your classroom. Alternatively, the content could simply be a topic you are interested in and knowledgeable about, such as culture and entertainment, social issues, health and fitness, artificial intelligence—anything! Chances are, if you're interested in a topic and see the value in it, your students will too.

## 2. GENERAL PURPOSE COMPETENCIES

Another big push from MEXT is to foster skills through authentic learning (or so-called “active learning”) that benefit students' future lives. (The new catchphrase for the Course of Study is literally “Beyond learning, the power to live” (“[生きる力、学びの、その先へ](#)” *ikiruchikara, manabi no, sono saki e*). These general purpose competencies are “soft skills” that students can use in the real world, beyond the confines of the classroom. For instance, a project that asks students to create presentation slides and give a talk in front of the class creates several opportunities for learning soft skills—everything from how to search online or use software to public speaking. It will be up to you to make a point of “training” these soft skills by demonstrating, for example, how to collaborate simultaneously with group members on the same presentation using Google Slides or giving students pointers about eye contact, gestures, and voice modulation for public speaking.



### 3. COGNITION

MEXT is also pushing for higher levels of student intellectual engagement. They are even adding the word “Logic” (論理 *ronri*) to the official title of English Expression classes in senior high schools (cf. [2011](#) versus [2021](#) Courses of Study). This means moving away from choral repetition and grammar pattern practice towards task- and project-based learning, which encourages critical thinking and deeper engagement with the content. In a class with limited English ability, it might be difficult to achieve a motivating level of cognitive activity. Consider implementing [scaffolding or translanguaging strategies](#) to give students the foothold they need to reach higher levels of cognitive engagement in a task or project.

An emphasis on cognition also means getting students to think critically about what they are learning. Don't be afraid to ask your students “Why?” questions. If you do, make sure you give them plenty of time to think! It is a bad habit of teachers wanting to move the lesson along to not give students a chance to answer meaningful questions. In addition to “Why” questions, consider asking students to categorize, analyze, and evaluate information whenever possible. This can be structured into a formal debate or kept more casual and fun with think-pair-share type activities. In any case, if it's ad hoc, it's likely to be skipped, so it's important to make room for this in your lesson planning. Critical thinking takes time and patience, but it will make your lessons much more meaningful for students.

### 4. COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Recently, the term “cooperative learning” has become a bit of an educational buzzword. The idea behind cooperative learning is that students can learn just as much (if not more) from their peers as from the teacher. Try to incorporate pair- and group-work activities into every lesson. This is not just about drilling the grammar pattern of the day in pairs or practicing a scenario or skit in a group. Giving students opportunities for peer feedback or peer evaluation can help them to keep themselves and each other accountable to the learning objectives. For example, you can have students peer review a piece of writing or evaluate their peers' presentations based on [an agreed-upon rubric](#). Or you can break up students into groups for [a jigsaw reading](#) activity, where they are responsible for teaching their group members information needed to complete the task. In general, incorporating a variety of solo, pair, group, and whole-class activities will help build community in the classroom.

### 5. MULTIMODALITY

Consider opportunities to introduce multi-modal input into your lessons. Modes might include texts (e.g. textbooks, news articles), visuals (photos, maps, diagrams), statistics (tables, graphs), video (YouTube clips, TED Talks), audio (podcasts, songs), or interactive media (comprehension quizzes with Kahoot!, instant polling with Google Forms). This will add variety to the students' input, and some students may learn better or more effectively with certain types of input over others.

These five areas of innovative lesson planning fit well with a CLIL approach. **Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)** is a dual-focused educational approach that recently has been gaining popularity in Japan. In CLIL, students learn content through language and language through content.

If you are interested in implementing CLIL into your team-taught lessons, please get in contact with Nate Olson, a former JET ALT and current researcher at Sophia University. Nate invites you to participate in [a pilot study](#) where he will be

a consultant on your team-taught CLIL project, helping you and your co-teacher to implement a CLIL approach. Please see his [TTCLIL project video series](#) for more information about CLIL and examples of team-taught CLIL in action.

*Nate is a former JET living in Tōkyō. Originally from Minnesota, he taught elementary, junior high, and senior high school as an ALT in Iwate and Hokkaidō. When he's not conducting research on team teaching and CLIL, you can find him studying Chinese, playing guitar, and riding his motorcycle across Japan.*



# Scaffolding Strategies for Teaching English

Shea Sakamoto (Chiba)

It was winter when I moved to Japan from still-warm and sunny California. The temperature was freezing, and I couldn't wait to get to my apartment and put the heat on. To me, this was a task that seemed simple enough and didn't require too much thought. Then, I saw what a Japanese air conditioner remote control looked like.

Have you ever tried doing something in an unfamiliar language without proper, effective guidance? It can feel intimidating, frustrating, overwhelming or simply not worth doing at all. Unfortunately, this is exactly how some Japanese students feel about their English classes.

Cue in scaffolding. Scaffolding is a method in which teachers support students to work just beyond the level they could achieve on their own. Psychologist Lev Vygotsky called this area the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). By breaking target lessons down into manageable chunks, students progress toward a deeper understanding and a greater level of independence. Because your students become

more competent with what you have taught them, you can gradually remove support. I usually approach this in my elementary school classes with a) introducing the vocabulary; b) teaching the target sentences; c) applying vocabulary with the target sentences; d) applying controlled practice as a class, in small groups, then in pairs; and e) application of the language by "freely" talking to as many students as they can in class.

Besides facilitating learning, scaffolds also:

1. Model and clearly define expectations.
2. Motivate interest related to the task.
3. Simplify tasks and make them more manageable and achievable.
4. Reduce frustration and risk by creating low-anxiety classrooms.
5. Clearly show differences between the students' work and the standard.
6. Help students focus on achieving their goal.

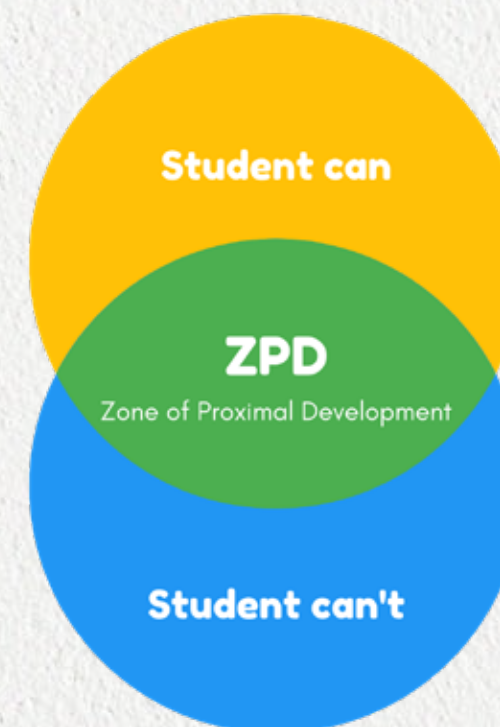
## Why is this important?

Given that classroom language learning is already inherently stressful, teachers should seek ways to reduce their students' anxiety. How your students feel about learning English can have a profound effect on the learning that occurs within your classes.

In linguist Stephen Krashen's Monitor Model of second language learning, the term "affective filter" is a metaphor to describe a learner's attitudes that affect the relative success of second language acquisition. Negative feelings

such as lack of motivation, lack of self-confidence and learning anxiety act as filters that hinder and obstruct language learning. Incorporating scaffolding into your classes will make your students feel like they are in an emotionally safe place. This sets the tone for a positive learning environment.

Here are a few scaffolding strategies you may or may not have tried out in the classroom yet. Or, maybe you did but have not used them lately and needed a bit of a nudge to remind yourself how helpful they can be when teaching English.



Shea Sakamoto



## Review Prior Knowledge

When introducing your brand new lesson, ask your students about what they think the content will be about to launch the learning process in your classroom. Sometimes, you will need to ask some questions, make suggestions, and build on comments to steer them in the right direction. But once they understand what it's all about and relate the content with their own lives, they will be more engaged with the lesson. When teaching a unit on Daily Routines, for instance, start off by asking what time your students woke up and if they remembered to wash their faces or brush their teeth before leaving the house.

## Front-load Vocabulary

Pre-teaching vocabulary arms students with the information that they need ahead of time to understand the target sentences and contextualize what is going on. Prioritize practice with learning these words so that your students will gain confidence when they need to be applied later on during the lesson.

## Use Auditory and Visual Aids

Show a video, have a slide presentation up on the smart board or flashcards on the blackboard. If you're feeling a bit fancy, try using realia which means authentic objects from real life that you can use in the classroom to teach a specific concept. Incorporating auditory and visual aids are essential to classroom instruction because they function as a memory aid and help the students make better associations with the information presented to them.

## Check For Understanding

It is important to note that large public school EFL classes have students of the same age in each grade but of widely mixed abilities. Some students take English classes outside of school, while others only have what they get in class each week. Checking often if all your students are still with you and have not spaced out is important to make sure they are following what's going on.

## Provide Talking Time

One of the best ways to understand a concept is to explain it to someone else. Breaking your students up into pairs and groups to articulate what you have just taught them in their own words is a great way for them to process new information. It also ensures that all your students, even your weakest ones, know what's going on. I like to start off by having them talk to the people closest to them and after a minute or so ask who understands and who still needs a bit of help. The students who understand what is being taught can then go off to their friends who need help to explain the point of the lesson themselves.

## Model, Model, Model

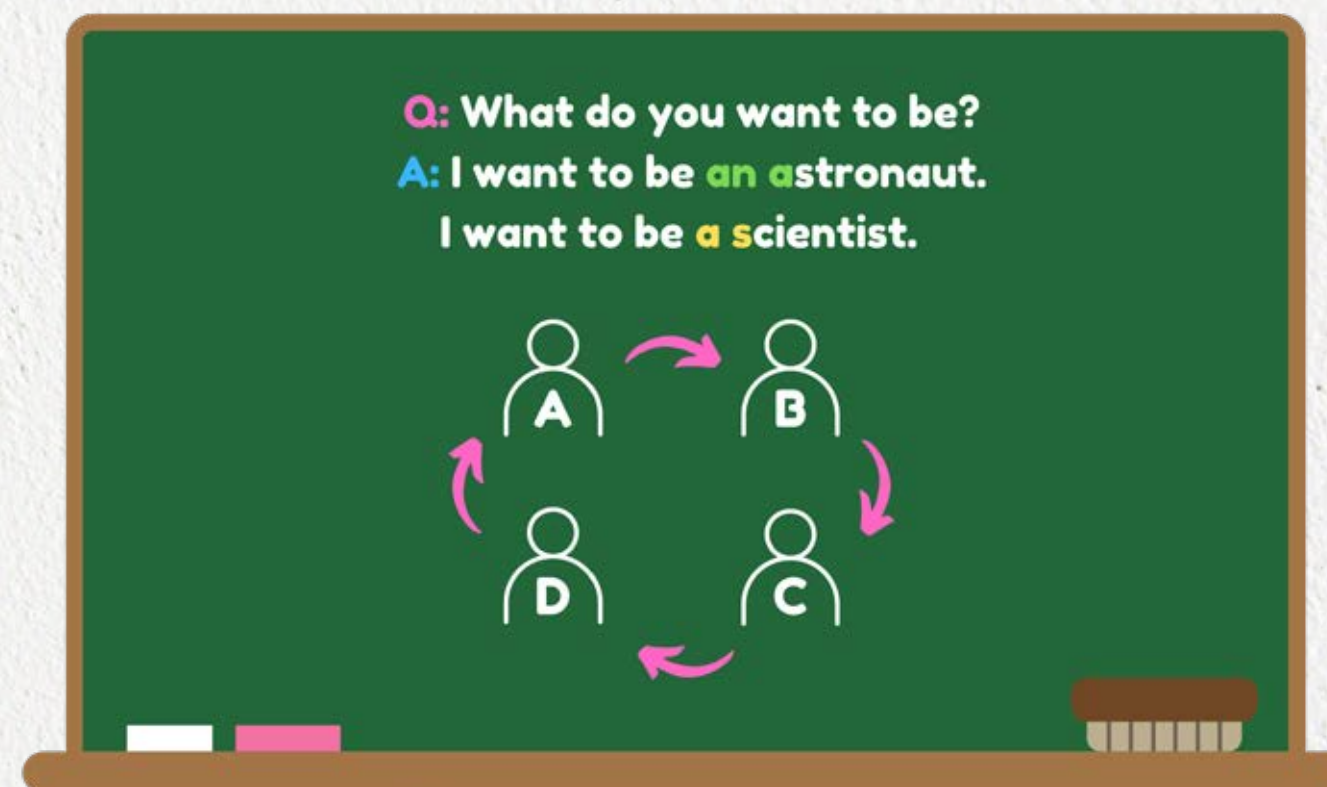
Modeling is a teaching strategy where a teacher explicitly shows the students how to play a game or complete an activity even before the students begin. For modeling to be effective, the teacher must know exactly what you want from your students and be highly detailed so that there are no gaps in instruction that lead to confusion.

In elementary school English classes, we tend to focus a lot on speaking. One of the simplest group activities I like to use is practicing the newly-introduced target question and answer in a circle. First, I will tell my class that they will be grouped in fours. Then, on the board I will draw a diagram of how the speaking activity is going to go. The members of the group are also labeled accordingly.

Then, I pick three kids or ask three people in a group to stand and go through the precise steps I want them to take. I always go first and take the role of Student A. I model the target language, attitude and behavior while giving

out instructions. Student B will respond to my question and ask Student C the target question. Student C will respond to Student B and the question to student D. Finally, Student D will ask me the question, and I will have a chance to answer. When my group completes the circle, we all take our seats.

In my experience, modeling bad examples after the good example and having students point out what they are not supposed to do makes them more mindful of the target language, their manner of speaking and even their non-verbal communication cues.



Shea Sakamoto



## Prioritize Practice

With more complicated activities than the one mentioned above, take some time to practice with them for a few minutes before letting them. If it is a game, let the first round be a practice round between teams before they battle it out with each other. If it is an activity, open the room up for questions or clarifications before proceeding. Whenever your students practice, verify that they are doing things correctly. Watch closely as they go through that you've taught and modeled for them, and if they do not meet your expectations, stop them and have them do it again.

## Set Them Up For Success

Students perform better when they fully understand what we expect from them. If they have speech tests or presentations, give them concrete examples of what they are expected to achieve and show samples of high quality work. Providing a rubric is a good way to show them what it would take to get the highest marks and allow them to assess themselves as they practice.

Scaffolding strategies have greatly helped me with finding my footing as a teacher. And like everything else, it needs practice to get it right. The strategies you need to employ may even vary from class to class despite using the same material. Being intentional about how you teach will almost always result in learning gains, and it is our jobs as educators to find out what works best. Over time, you will become more attuned to knowing when your students are ready to move on to the next challenge. At the end of the academic year, you'll probably even surprise yourself to see how far they've actually come along with all the baby steps that you've helped them take.

Shea is a licensed Japanese public elementary school teacher, M.Ed. in TESOL student, and a Japanese language learner from Los Angeles, California. In her free time, she likes to write about her teaching and language learning experiences on [PenPenPenguin](#). You can follow her on Instagram [@penpenpenguin.jp](#)

# IDIOM OF THE MONTH

Lara Yi (Incoming JET)



己己己己

IKOMIKI

The meaning of *ikomiki* is that something is all the same due to the similar resemblance of each character found in the idiom.

## IDIOM BREAKDOWN (1)

己 / い / i

己 / こ / ko

己 / み / mi

己 / き / ki

## EXAMPLE SENTENCES (2)

あの双子は本当よく似ているね。まさに、己己己己だよ。

*Ano futago wa hontō yoku nite iru ne. Masani, ikomiki dayo.*

Those twins really do resemble each other. They're practically two of a kind.

## SOURCES

1. <https://bit.ly/3bBHPgJ>
2. <http://bit.ly/2MNApkE>



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*"Just because I look sexy on the cover of Rolling Stone doesn't mean I'm naughty" — Britney Spears*

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*"Sorry Babe, gotta take care of these ninjas." — Marisha Ray, Critical Role*

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*"We're living in limbo. In a winter that never ends." — Elisa Shua Dusapin, "Winter in Sokcho"*

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*"Photography is an art of observation. It has little to do with the things you see and everything to do with the way you see them." — Elliot Erwitt*



# Learning the Art of Kimono

Rowan Hatcher (Ōsaka)



It took me several years after moving to Japan to try wearing a *kimono*. While I had always wanted to, for many reasons I didn't think I could.

There were industry-rooted reasons: the size of my body is not accounted for in the way *tanmono*, or rolls of fabric used in the making of traditional garments, are crafted and such patterns are cut. There were ethical reasons: I am European American, and I did not want my whiteness to allow me appropriation of something that was not mine to participate in. And there were practical and aesthetic reasons: the longstanding rules regarding how to wear kimono are detailed and daunting.

I have gained many bits of knowledge regarding the making and wearing of kimono and *yukata*. However, I am not a professional, and have not formally studied under any teacher of this topic. I hope my layperson's understanding of this wonderful facet of Japanese history and culture can help you on your own journey with it. After all, each individual's journey with a kimono will be like a kimono itself—unique and bespoke to the wearer.

I went shopping for my first kimono with a trusted colleague. We got along like close siblings and doted on each other constantly. We were searching for a kimono I could wear to the upcoming graduation ceremony at our school. She was certain she could find me something, with the help of the staff at her favorite shop, and I was . . . less so. With each piece I tried on, she understood with increasing clarity my trepidation. You see, the absolute basics of a properly fitting kimono, regardless of gender, have four points: collar, sleeve, hip, and hem.

You see, the absolute basics of a properly fitting kimono, regardless of gender, have four points: collar, sleeve, hip, and hem.

First, a feminine kimono has a collar that sits flat and crosses over the dip in one's collar bone. Ideally it also gently rests on the side of your neck before it dips out and away from the nape in the back. How far it dips is a signal of propriety.

**After all, each individual's journey with a kimono will be like a kimono itself—unique and bespoke to the wearer.**

Second, the hem of the sleeves should come to rest at the dip between wrist bone and thumb joint. Not only does this add charm, but makes the sleeves, which can double as pockets, more easily accessible.

Finally, a kimono pattern is predominantly squares, which allows for the neat perpendicular lines from the obi to the bottom hem in a properly fitting kimono. As one would expect, this kind of pattern fits best on a boxy frame. The human body, however, has curves. In order to bridge this gap, the circumference of the fabric at the waist should be about 1.3 to 1.5 times the circumference of the hips, and the use of fabric and padding below the *nagajuban*, or skin-layer garment put on before the kimono, is common. The hem of the entire garment should fall at or just below the ankle.

The kimono I decided on was a fresh green silk kimono with yellow and orange flower accents. The collar was the only thing that fit appropriately; the sleeves were too short and the front wouldn't close properly. Nothing could be done about the sleeves—after all, the width of the *tanmono* is predetermined—but I could cover the splayed fabric at my legs with *hakama*, and that's what I did.

It was a smashing success; I had wanted to wear kimono to graduation after watching my coworkers wear it the previous years, and I knew seeing me in kimono would bring joy to the students who were graduating. And still, I wondered if it wasn't appropriation.



About a year later, I was on a date with an American girl in Kyōto. We had many discussions about the ways in which our whiteness blinds us in the pursuit of our personal interests, and the ethical dilemmas presented by wearing the traditional clothing of another culture. Borrowing from Emi Ito's open letter to white makers and designers who are inspired by the kimono and Japanese culture, we can consider the three P's—power, profit, and people—when making our decisions.

While knowledge of kimono and its rules has long been cloistered away within the industry, this doesn't mean that it is a closed practice. In addition, the kimono worn as rentals by tourists, or those that can be acquired at secondhand stores, or even those that can be made-to-order from a professional kimono shop, are different from the garments worn in religious or spiritual settings. While kimono may be part of a character's design and thus worn during cosplay, the kimono itself is not a costume.

And yet, whether watching others in kimono or wearing one ourselves, we cannot remain unaware of how power plays into our access to and participation in the world of kimono. Even as a minority in Japan, those of us from Western countries, especially those of us who are white, must consider the space our more globally dominant cultural background gives us. Others from less dominant cultures do not have this space, because we have taken it. The road to hell is paved with good intentions, and the road to appropriation starts with indifference and minimization.

For much of Japanese history, the kimono was worn every day, by everyone. However, with the Westernization and industrialization of Japan, wearing kimono has fallen out of common practice. Now, we are experiencing a revival of sorts. Many young Japanese are falling back in love with kimono and bringing it into their everyday lives, and with them many non-Japanese both country-side and abroad are finding new appreciation for and inspiration in this part of the culture. For those without Japanese heritage that wear kimono, especially those that claim cultural understanding and inspiration from it, we must not dismiss the ingrained power dynamics surrounding us. It is important to be open to learning and to be humble to correction.



Photo: Bruno Aguirre  
(unsplash.com)

**Many young Japanese are falling back in love with kimono and bringing it into their everyday lives, and with them many non-Japanese both country-side and abroad are finding new appreciation for and inspiration in this part of the culture.**

Many young Japanese are falling back in love with kimono and bringing it into their everyday lives, and with them many non-Japanese both country-side and abroad are finding new appreciation for and inspiration in this part of the culture.

Kimono is an art and a language; it requires curiosity and care to learn. If one is approaching it for cultural exchange and appreciation, deep respect and commitment from both learner and teacher are necessary for it to be truly mutually beneficial and break free from appropriation. A commitment to learning the rules will guide one away from careless, and sometimes harmful, application and elevate one's outfit.

While there are a mountain of such rules regarding both the practical and aesthetic aspects of kimono outfit coordination, the detail and nuance of which would make anyone's head spin, these rules can also be distilled down into more manageable guidelines. For aesthetics—material, color, and pattern. For practicality—sparkle, number, and difficulty.

The first of these is material. Silk will always make a kimono more formal than cotton or wool, let alone synthetic fabrics. If there is



any gold stitching and embroidery, it's formal. One must also consider the way the fabric was processed. There are renowned, and increasingly rare, processing techniques that will raise the level of formality of a piece.

Following that is color. Color is decided by season, both of the year and of one's life. The color one chooses should evoke certain qualities associated with these seasons. A basic understanding of the elements of color temperature, hue, shade, tint, and tone will be of aid. For example, red may be worn at any time of year, but a lighter, cooler pink will work better in the spring; a clear, bright red in the summer; and a darker, warmer maroon in the fall or winter.

Kimono is a three-dimensional art that brings in a deep appreciation of the seasons and nature. Therefore, one must pay attention to what patterns are on a kimono to know when to wear it. While certain motifs can evoke a general meaning, much like how certain flowers can be used to convey a message, and can be worn year-round, that same motif presented in a different form can limit the time of year one can wear the piece.



It is here we see how today's kimono practitioners are softening these rules, stretching what it means to wear kimono both on the fashion stage and in their everyday lives.

A good example of this is cherry blossoms, or *sakura*. Sakura are much beloved in all forms of Japanese art, and the kimono is included in this. A kimono with sakura petals or the blossoms themselves may be worn at any time of the year, invoking the meaning of rebirth, beauty, and appreciation for the current moment, while a kimono with a sakura tree may only be worn in spring.

Now, there are also practical considerations when wearing a kimono. There are many pieces in a kimono outfit, from the nagajuban to the *obijime*. If any of these pieces have gold, silver, or sparkly material incorporated into them, they will increase the formality of the overall outfit.

The number of pieces can also dress up or dress down an outfit. A simple *obi* can be dressed up with a sparkly *obijime* and the addition of an *obiage*. However, much like jewelry in Western fashion it is possible to overdo it, so keep the overall balance of the outfit in mind when selecting which pieces to use.

Finally, the difficulty of the knot used on the *obi*, and any additional styling of the *obijime*, may also increase the overall formality of the outfit. You can find tutorials on sites like youtube for simpler knots, but it is recommended to invest in kimono lessons to learn the more challenging ties.

Even with these simplifications, the task of creating the so-called perfect kimono outfit is a dizzying one. It is here we see how today's kimono practitioners are softening these rules, stretching what it means to wear kimono both on the fashion stage and in their everyday lives.

While the old rules such as what colors to wear and when, the formality of different patterns and designs, which knot to use on the *obi*, whether and which accessories to add, etc. are still important and a vital part of determining the overall outfit, today's kimono-wearing generation largely perceive kimono as a way to express oneself.

It is here we see how today's kimono practitioners are softening these rules, stretching what it means to wear kimono both on the fashion stage and in their everyday lives.

It is here we see new answers to what has long been considered a strict and exclusive style. Who says only one roll of fabric must be used to make a kimono? The answer is "*katamigawari*." Who says the designs on a kimono are set? Maya Caulfield and Serge Mouangue, among others, offer their own replies.

Men can wear so-called women's kimono, like when Daiki Shigeoka wore a *homongi* for a Johnny's West promotional photoshoot, and women can wear kimono in the "*otoko-poi*," or "masculine," style. Sheila Cliffe and Liza Dably both researched and wrote books on the history and social importance of kimono, with Cliffe's book illuminating the stories of present-day kimono-wearers both in Japan and abroad.

The old rules are important. Rather than dismissing them outright as being gold-fashioned, sexist, or too strict for true self expression, I find it important to understand the why. Sometimes you'll find that a rule is illuminating a societal agreement about reality. Other times, you'll find them to be the expression of an ideal. And yet other times, you'll find a rule that exists as a response to some other industry or cultural factor, or that exists to confine the expression of the individual. With each rule, we can come to understand both Japan's culture and our own culture and ideas better.

Photo: Mitchell Luo  
(unsplash.com)



In the same way, these new answers are important. Society is changing, and with it what we collectively agree to be our reality is too. While some ideals remain true against the press of time, new challenges in our lives allow for the strength of new ideals to take the stage. History is created every day, and as such the parameters for our lives and our creations evolve with it. It is in the changing of the old that we define the new. It is with the expression of the self that we create a path to the future.

The world of traditional Japanese clothing is so beautiful, and I am lucky to have been allowed in in the way that I have. I started my journey with a kimono thinking there was no way for me to wear one. While certain facets of this assumption will forever be something I contend with, I do not have to let that be the end of things. For example, I will never be able to wear vintage kimonos in the proper way, but I can appreciate them and help others who can wear them to enjoy them. My whiteness will always give me cause to reflect on my participation in this culture, but I can lean in and center the voices of the people to whom it belongs. And I will always have more to learn: not only of the history, or the rules, but also the stories of each kimono I come across, and the people who wore them. And that is what I look forward to most: learning, and celebrating, the beauty of the people who have shared this part of their culture, and themselves, with me.

*"A Renaissance man of sorts, Rowan picks up knowledge like crows collect shiny things. They were first officially published through an afterschool arts program in middle school, but found writing and other creative endeavors put on the back burner as they pursued a dual credit enrollment program in high school, and then a bachelors in Interior Design. Since relocating to Japan as a "cultural ambassador" on the JET Programme in 2015, Rowan has been able to make more time for the things they like: arts and culture, psychology, and intersectional feminism. They hope to center their work on these interests, filtered through their queer and neurodivergent lens. Currently residing in Ōsaka, Rowan dreams of living with their chosen family in an old Japanese country house, writing and farming and having a grand old time."*



# Shop Local with Kanaho Morisue

Kanaho Morisue (Okayama)



“My motto in life is not to be particular about things. To be fun and make things that do not hurt others; peaceful pieces.”

It hurts my head when I try to put into words how I feel about art and fashion. I don't know much about them.

I am often inspired by the various things I see in my daily life, the colors and shapes of nature.

I have a lot of favorite artists. I've always liked Pablo Picasso since I was a kid. I also like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Friedensreich Hundertwasser, James Ensor and Yasuo Kuniyoshi. The inspiration I get from these artists is huge.

As for clothes, I mainly choose clothes that I fall in love with at first sight at second-hand clothing stores and so I wear what I like. Most of them are clothes that you don't know who made them, but they are also inspired by designers.

Art is like a cloud that has no fixed shape and floats around inside me.”

This month's issue marks the start of our new column, affectionately named *Shop Local with...*, which will see us chat with the many talented designers and makers in Japan's fashion and beauty industries.

We're kicking off with Kanaho Morisue, a multitasking blogger and artist, whose style personifies a sense of joy and playfulness. Her bold artworks, upcycled garments, and jewellery pieces are documented and sold on Instagram. She spoke to us about the inspirations that fuel her bold artworks and distinctive fashion sense.



Kanaho Morisue is often found painting while helping her father with his work. With the remainder of her time, she likes to make accessories and take pictures. Kanaho can be found through her [website](#) and Instagram [@kanaho\\_show](#)



# WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE A TikToker?

Patrick Smith (Tōkyō) interviewed by Rachel Fagundes (Okayama)

## Hello there! Please tell us about your TikTok channel and how you got started out.

I began TikTok in October of 2019 after a friend convinced me to try it out. I enjoy dancing and would often make fun silly dances for my students at school, and my friend was positive that I could find success on TikTok if I danced for an audience there as well. After my first few uploads I quickly shifted direction to more skit-based videos, pointing out funny things that I've experienced as a black person in Japan or interesting things/places in the country.

## How have different videos you've made reached different audiences?

In the beginning, my videos reached audiences mostly in the Middle East and were not seen at all by Japanese people (which I had expected since I live in Japan) or by users in the U.S. (which I was hoping for since my humor was more of a U.S. style and my videos were all in English).

Then a few notable videos, like one where I talked about about being constantly stared at in Japan, a funny skit about going to a Japanese public bath, and a tour of an actual public bath (my most viral video to date) saw large numbers in terms of views, likes, and follows and exposed many users from all over the world to my account.

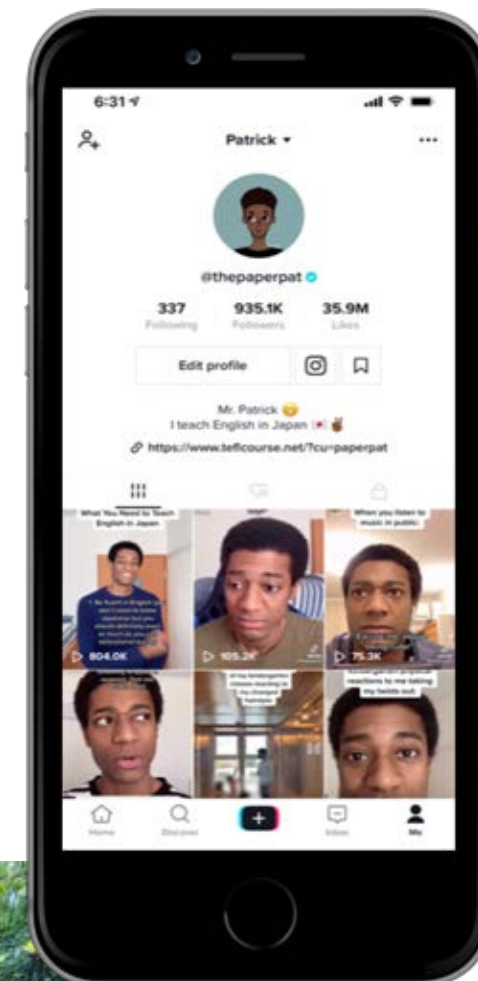
The video about being stared at was the first to go semi-viral. It drew the attention of many foreigners living in Japan who had the same experience and voiced their mutual frustration. The comedy skit about Japanese public baths drew a lot of attention from Japanese users of TikTok, as they found an American perspective of such a basic component

of Japanese life fascinating. The onsen video tour I filmed drew immense numbers of international followers (most notably, American), curious about Japanese culture. I think the strange (to Americans) concept of Japanese public baths, along with the brief explanation I recorded over the video, helped to make the video go viral. As of now, the vast majority of my followers are from the U.S.



## Why do you think there is such a large audience interested in content about Japan and what makes your channel stand out?

I think I have such a large audience due to a number of reasons. I think there is a deep interest in Japanese culture for many young people in the U.S. due to things like anime and video games. I also think the fact that I'm a black man teaching English to kindergarteners is also such a unique thing for people to see. They really enjoy my teaching videos. And lastly, I think that because I keep my content very clean and family-friendly it has a very broad appeal to people who come across it. I often get comments that whole families like to watch my videos.



## Tell us about your experience with your account getting suppressed.

In July, TikTok decided to suppress my account. Abnormally low views, likes, comments, etc. for every video I would post. A number of users on the app experienced this around that same time as well for unknown reasons. To this day, we have yet to figure out why and how this happens. The suppression greatly hindered account growth for me as it lasted for about three months. Although it was very discouraging, it led to me trying out a vast amount of styles and trends for TikTok. I tried to find anything that would "do well" in TikTok's mysterious algorithm. I grew as a creator during those three months, and eventually my account was restored to its normal state. To this day, though, I still don't know why the suppression happened or what made TikTok eventually fix my account.





### That must be really disheartening. How did you stay motivated to make content during that time?

I wanted to give up a number of times when there seemed to be no end in sight, but I kept on holding on to the hope that with my next post things would change. I also would get messages from fans letting me know how much my content inspired them to travel or work abroad one day. Messages like that gave me the drive to keep making videos even if not many people saw them.

### How has your content been received by the African American community?

I was both surprised and encouraged by the support I've received from my fellow African-Americans on the app. African-Americans don't typically travel outside the U.S. We tend to stay in places and do

things that we know and trust. On top of that, there's a lot of fear felt by those in the black community who are interested in traveling abroad that's centered around how we will be perceived. I initially thought that there wouldn't be very many African-American supporters on the app, but I've gotten so many supportive and dedicated black followers who see what I'm doing and say they are inspired to travel and teach because of it. They're also extremely kind. They cheer me on.

### How has being a teacher trained you to be a performer?

As a teacher, you have to be ready to adapt to the often crazy things that can happen in the classroom. My skits tend to focus on some of the crazier things that have happened to me, so I just think back to those times and react in similar fashion. I always enjoyed theater growing up and love being able to perform a bit in that way for TikTok.

### Walk us through your process of making a video, from conception to completion.

It really depends on the type of video I create. The type I most commonly make at the moment (teacher-student skits) generally takes about 45 minutes. I'll typically get an idea and then immediately jump into filming. I don't usually use a script of any sort. The number of shots I use for the video depends on the type of video I'm making, but it's usually just one shot. TikTok has many helpful and creative editing tools built into the app that make the process very easy and user-friendly. It's easy for first-time users and doesn't require any external equipment or components aside from a phone. I'll often have to do multiple takes for my videos as I tend to be a bit of a perfectionist when it comes to my videos, but I rarely have technical issues with the app itself that cause complications for filming. After I've filmed the video, I type out captions for it and then proceed with the posting.

### What other platforms, like YouTube or Instagram, do you make content for? Has starting on TikTok made it easier to grow an audience on these other platforms?

At the moment, I have a YouTube channel, Instagram and Twitter profiles. I also recently began streaming on Twitch. Due to the large number of followers I've accrued on TikTok, I've been able to bring many of my followers from TikTok over to those platforms. If it weren't for the growth as a content creator I've experienced on TikTok, I wouldn't have nearly as many (if any) opportunities to make internet friends, share things I enjoy with the world, spread awareness on important issues, and make an impact on/inspire those interested in teaching abroad. Many of these things I do on other platforms like Instagram and Twitch.

### What's your advice to someone starting out?

My advice to someone starting out on TikTok would be to figure out the type of content you LIKE to make early on. Trends are fun and I even enjoy doing them from time to time, but figuring out what you enjoy making is important. You'll stick with it longer that way and grow a following that enjoys it as well. Along with that, though, I would not recommend making only one kind of content. If your entire profile consists of one style of video, then it's hard to branch out and try other things. Diversify your content.

Another piece of advice is to be a light. There is a lot of negativity and toxicity on TikTok, unfortunately, and it's often known for that. There is also so much positivity and love and acceptance to be found on the app. Communities come together and friends are often made on TikTok. If someone is wanting to start a TikTok "career," making videos that bring happiness or laughter, or share valuable information or simply encourage others are some of the most important. It's through these kinds of videos that users are able to gain many followers in a short time.



### What future projects do you have coming up?

I'll be releasing merch sometime in 2021. I'm really excited for it! No word yet on when exactly, but keep an eye out!

*Patrick Smith is an English teacher living in Tōkyō, Japan. He shares his experience as a foreigner on his TikTok channel as well as his other social media. Find him as "thepaperpat" on TikTok, [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#), [Twitch](#), and Clubhouse, and "the.paper.pat" on [Instagram](#).*

*Rachel Fagundes is a fourth-year JET in rural Okayama and the Entertainment editor of **CONNECT**. She likes cats, comic books, the Italian Renaissance, and Japanese festivals. She spends most of her free time daydreaming about Mexican food.*






# MARCH REVIEWS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommended Album:  
*何者 (Nanimono)* by Polkadot Stingray

Ryon Morrin (Hokkaidō) | Release Date: December 16, 2020

Hailing from Fukuoka, Japan, Polkadot Stingray is a four-person alternative rock powerhouse formed in 2015. After releasing their first EP in 2016, the band's "Telecaster Stripes" single quickly became a hit among J-rock fans, putting them on the map. On their third LP, *何者 (Nanimono)*, the band steps further into the pop music realm but retains some of the grittier aspects of their sound on a handful of tracks. While this album lacks some of the speed and distortion of previous releases, it doesn't come off as forcibly diluted. It's the natural progression of a band exploring new ground without shedding what makes them recognizable.



Stylistically, *Nanimono* bounces from groovy rhythms and lighthearted pop melodies to straightforward rock jams, and it works surprisingly well. "SHAKE! SHAKE!" oozes funk with its popping bassline and heavy doses of wah pedal; it was made for the dancefloor. In contrast, "化身" (*Keshin*) steps on the gas and adds some crunch to the guitar amps. The combo of buttery piano chords and flashy lead guitar licks is straight from the playbook of indie-pop stars like Gesu no Kiwami Otome, but Polkadot Stingray executes it with their own flair.

The album's introspective, conflicted lyrics, while mostly in Japanese, are another high point of the album and well worth taking the time to translate and think about. Lead singer Shizuku digs into the complexity of relationships and their endings, wrestling with both nostalgia and bitterness on songs like "JET," which basks in the memories of an ex who is long gone. "トゲめくスピカ" (*Togemeku Supika*) revolves around

a mutually destructive pair, recalling happier times but ultimately coming to terms with the serious flaws in their relationship. The song is somehow warmly sentimental and coldly pragmatic at once.

*Nanimono*'s overall high energy and fast pace is meant for foot taps and head bobs, and it's sure to shine when played live. It's hard to imagine a crowd that's anything short of wild, screaming along to each song at a Polkadot Stingray show, and that feeling is captured on this record.

You can stream *Nanimono* now on Spotify and YouTube Music.

*Ryon Morrin is a second-year ALT from Boise, Idaho, U.S. living in Shintotsukawa, Hokkaidō, a small farming town known for its high-quality rice and beautiful scenic views. He's a writer, a traveler, and a lover of live music.*





## Recommended Video Game: *OMORI*

Sarah Baughn (Ishikawa)

*"The truth is . . .  
Your story is already over. You just  
have to remember it."*

*OMORI* is a psychological horror RPG game told expertly through its unique and striking visuals and outstanding music. It is currently available on Steam, with an expected release on Nintendo Switch. *OMORI* was first announced in 2013 and released on December 25, 2020 after many long delays, and I'm happy to say *OMORI* is well worth the wait.

Omori lives alone in a blank room unless he decides he'd rather spend time with his colorful neighbors, who are always excited to see him. When one of their friends goes missing, the group takes a break from their constant games and picnics to make it their mission to go find him. All the while, Omori is haunted by "Something" that keeps appearing, poking holes through the sugary exterior to remind you that it's a psychological horror game.

Focused on the power of dreams and imagination, *OMORI* creates some fascinating and whimsical environments that are fun to explore. Omori and his friends travel through many environments, including a magical desert made of brown sugar in a land full of dinosaurs, baked goods, and a 'food pyramid' you excavate with a spoon—which is a fair example of how bizarrely charming the entire experience can be.

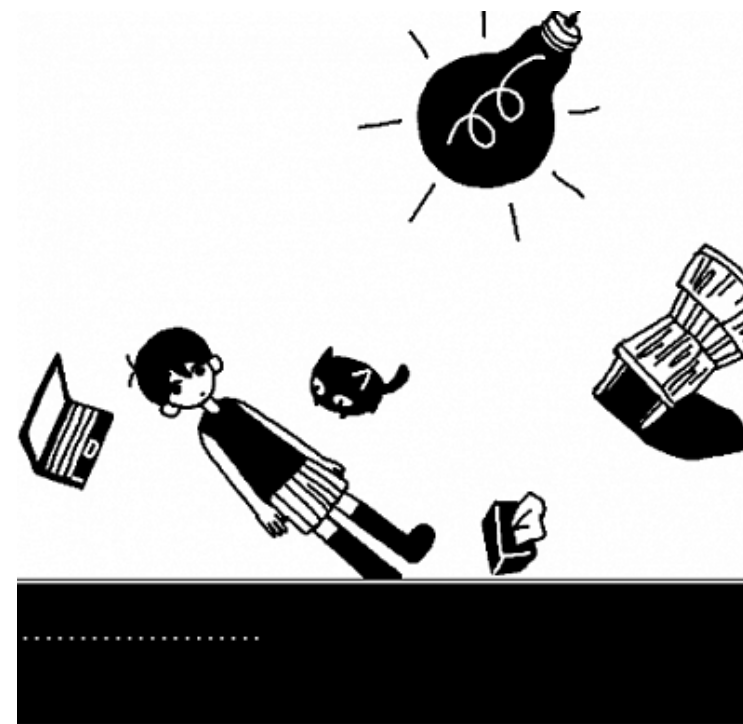
While the adorable art style has a good chance of lulling you into forgetting that *OMORI* is a psychological horror game, when the "Something" monsters do make their presence known, the art style shifts dramatically and the horror sets in. The game has some pretty serious warnings at the beginning that people should pay attention to. *OMORI* is intimately tied with depictions of

mental illness, loss, and trauma, with the monsters being more symbolic depictions of personal fears that did genuinely freak me out at times.

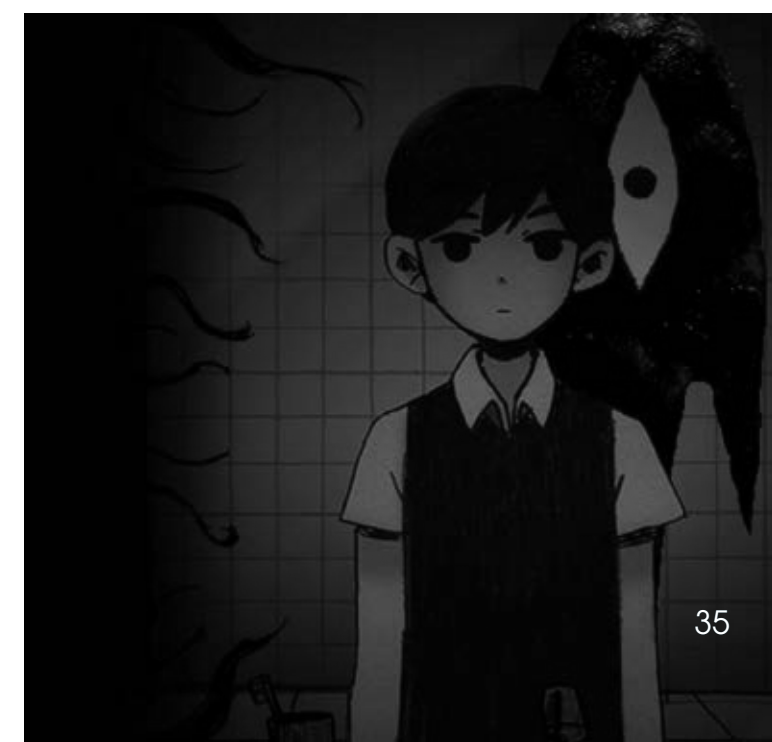
Made in RPG Maker, *OMORI* is primarily a classic turn-based RPG that sometimes requires you to solve puzzles to continue. The combat system is simple but has a neat "emotion" mechanic that allows you to make your party members Angry, Happy, or Sad which gives them benefits and detriments in combat. Being Happy, for example, ups the critical hit rate of a character while also lowering their overall hit rate. The group also has Follow-up Attacks that have to be timed correctly, with the party members working together to cheer each other on to become Happy or annoying other party members into becoming Angry. With the focus on emotions and relationships, it's a very charming, if simple, system that ties well into the game's themes.

There are puzzles to solve, a ton of side quests to do, and large areas of entirely optional content which helps flesh out the quirkiness of the world Omori lives in. As with many cult-classic RPG maker games, though, the focus isn't on the game mechanics, but rather on the story, art, and atmosphere. *OMORI*'s soundtrack is also worth mentioning, coming in at 179 different tracks that really elevate the more emotional moments and make the boss fights feel infinitely more hype.

Though not for everyone, if you have any interest in RPG games, psychological horror, or an incredibly tragic story that I'm still trying to wrap my head around weeks later, I cannot recommend *OMORI* enough.



*Sarah lives in Ishikawa and spends her time playing koto, studying Japanese, and traveling. Except when traveling got cancelled and Sarah found herself living vicariously through video games again.*





Film Review: *Wonder Woman 1984* Rhema Baquero (Hyōgo)



*Wonder Woman 1984* opens with an epic trial of strength and speed where young Diana competes against adult Amazons across the shores and forest of Themyscira, learning a lesson of not taking shortcuts to achieve what she wants. In the movie's present day of 1984, we are treated to another delightful action sequence as Wonder Woman attempts to foil a heist set in a mall. This sets up Diana's undercover gig as a senior anthropologist at the Smithsonian Institution, and introduces us to the soon-to-be villains Barbara/Cheetah (played by Kristen Wig) and Maxwell Lord (played by the *The Mandalorian*'s Pedro Pascal).

Unfortunately, after two grand opening scenes, the plot begins to lag as the narrative transforms into a campy 80's rom-com, muddled with an unwieldy wish-granting plot. Even more disappointingly, *Wonder Woman 1984* loses the powerful,

driven woman we first met in the 2017 premiere movie. Diana has been set on auto pilot for about 70 years, pining after the man who saved the day so she could save tomorrow. And when Trevor does reappear, it's explained via a problematic body-stealing plot device that Diana (and the film) never bothers to question, but leaves audiences feeling uncomfortable or alarmed.

Gal Gadot, Wig, Pascal, and Chris Pine do all deliver stellar performances in each of their own roles. Notably Pine, who navigates the new decade as Steve Trevor in wide-eyed wonderment of the fashions and technologies, flipping his and Diana's roles from the first film. Wig, as Cheetah, begins beautiful yet unnoticed, but still pulls a transformation that is mostly believable. However, though Wonder Woman is strong, agile, and graceful, we unfortunately see little about her growth as a person. Instead, we have a romantic comedy featuring an iconic hero. The murky plot keeps her and other characters fraught with a lack of agency and resolution that leaves the viewer piecing together their own connections and conclusions.

2020 needed a superhero story it could believe in. Unfortunately, *Wonder Woman 1984* was not that story.

*Wonder Woman 1984* was released on December 18, 2020 for Japan and on the 25th in America. Watch it now on HBO Max.



Rhema Baquero is a third-year Assistant Language Teacher placed in the great port city of Kōbe. She can often be found in a coffee shop either reading, writing, drawing, or studying Japanese.



# MARCH RELEASES

Rachel Fagundes (Okayama)

## MOVIES

### March 5

- Raya and the Last Dragon (2021)
- The Last Full Measure (2019)
- Space Is the Place (1974)
- Baseball Girl (2019)
- Aria the Crepuscolo (2021)

### March 8

- Evangelion: 3.0+1.0 Thrice Upon a Time (2021)

### March 12

- The Outpost (2019)
- Vivarium (2019)
- Feels Good Man (2020)
- Ordinary Happiness (2019)
- The Golden Holiday (2020)
- Brave: Gunjyo Senki (2021)
- Sukutte Goran (2021)

### March 19

- Tom and Jerry (2021)
- Minari (2020)
- Paranoid: Everything Wipe from the Beginning (2021)
- Queens of the Field (2019)
- Caution, Hazardous Wife: The Movie (2021)

### March 23

- Malibu Road (2021)
- Eiga Healin' Good Precure: Yume no Machi de Kyun! Tto Go Go! Dai Henshin!! (2021)

### March 26

- Nomadland (2020)
- Monster Hunter (2020)
- Sputnik (2020)
- Tesla (2020)
- Lords of Chaos (2018)
- Undine (2020)
- Here We Are (2020)
- Max Richter's Sleep (2019)
- Girls und Panzer das Finale: Part III (2021)
- Poslednee ispytanie (2018)
- The Time Guardians (2020)
- Kamen Rider Zero-One Others: Kamen Rider Metsuboujinrai (2021)

## GAMES

### March 2

- PixelJunk Raiders (Stadia)
- Maquette (PC, PS4, PS5)

### March 3

- 3 out of 10 (Switch)
- Sir Lovelot (PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, Switch)

- Revita – Steam Early Access (PC)
- Bang-On Balls: Chronicles – Steam Early Access (PC)

### March 5

- Harvest Moon: One World (Switch)

### March 9

- Stronghold: Warlords (PC)
- Apex Legends (Switch)

### March 12

- Pascal's Wager: Definitive Edition (PC)
- Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, Switch)

### March 16

- Mundaun (PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, Switch)
- Stubbs the Zombie in Rebel Without a Pulse (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

### March 18

- Minute of Islands (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- Cartel Tycoon – Steam Early Access (PC)
- Neurodeck (PC, Switch)

### March 19

- Plants vs Zombies: Battle For Neighbourville Complete Edition (Switch)

### March 23

- Tunche (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

### March 24

- Tales from the Borderlands (Switch)

### March 25

- Dandy Ace (PC)

### March 26

- It Takes Two (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Monster Hunter Rise (Switch)
- Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 1 and 2 (PS5, Xbox Series X/S)
- Balan Wonderworld (PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X, Switch)

### March 30

- Evil Genius 2: World Domination (PC)
- Kingdom Hearts HD 1.5+2.5 Remix (PC)
- Kingdom Hearts HD 2.8 Final Chapter Prologue (PC)
- Kingdom Hearts 3 + Re Mind (PC)
- Kingdom Hearts Melody of Memory (PC)
- Narita Boy (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

### March - Date Unannounced

- Disco Elysium: The Final Cut (PC, PS4, PS5)

Sources:

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

<https://www.vg247.com/2021/01/22/video-game-release-dates-2021/>



# SAVING JAPAN'S GENTLE GIANTS

An insight into the conservation of the Japanese giant salamander

Richard Pearce (Tottori)

## An overview of the Japanese giant salamander

The Japanese giant salamander is a very special creature. It is a large amphibian that can only be found in some of Japan's rivers. It is one of only three remaining members of the Cryptobranchidae family, which are the largest living amphibians known today. Their biology has hardly changed in millions of years, earning them the title of "living dinosaurs." The Japanese giant salamander is considered the second largest in this family and can grow up to 1.5 m in length, only slightly smaller than its closely related cousin, the Chinese giant salamander. The Hellbender of the eastern United States is the third, smaller member of the family, growing up to 74 cm in length.

They are generally active at night, relying on smell and touch to locate prey such as fresh-water crab, fish, frogs, and insects, catching them with a rapid sideways snap of the mouth. The salamander has an extremely slow metabolism and can go for several weeks without eating. This species' large size and the lack of gills in fully developed adults are thought to confine them to cold, fast-flowing water, where oxygen is in good supply.

*"The Japanese giant salamander is currently listed as "vulnerable" in the Ministry of Environment's Red List of Threatened Species"*



Mid-August to mid-September marks the breeding season of the Japanese giant salamanders. During this time, large males wait inside their dens for females to enter and spawn. Once a female lays her eggs, the males fertilizes them with his sperm. It is possible for several females to enter a single den to lay their eggs. Once the spawning takes place, the male alone takes care of the eggs and

larvae for a period of around six months. For this reason, the males are known as "*nushi*" (meaning "den master").

## The status of Japanese giant salamanders in the wild

Japanese giant salamanders became a nationally protected species under the "Special Natural Monument" designation in 1952. This was an important step in preventing Japanese giant salamanders from being harvested for food. However, even though it is illegal for anyone other than licensed researchers to handle or catch giant salamanders, their habitats often have no formal protection at all. If their precious habitats are degraded or destroyed, the salamanders cannot and will not survive. And that is where we find ourselves now.

The Japanese giant salamander is currently listed as "vulnerable" in the Ministry of Environment's Red List of Threatened Species. However, this only tells a part of the story.

Urgent changes are needed at local and national level

Compared to Europe and North America, animal conservation and environmental protection in Japan is a relatively new concept. Simply put, the systems presently in place in Japan are inadequate and urgent changes are needed at the national and local level. Countries such as the United States and the U.K. have a well established "top-down" approach to environmental protection. There are strict regulations and well-defined guidelines surrounding habitat protection set and enforced by the central government ("the top"). Importantly, there is a framework of



strong deterrents in place, with consequences for breaking the rules, such as heavy fines and even imprisonment. Governmental environmental protection agencies are well funded and have teeth. In contrast, Japan has relied in the past on a “bottom-up” approach to environmental protection, which saw good local land management and farming practices resulting in healthy and sustainable habitats for wildlife.

I’m not at all saying that the top-down, Western approach is perfect but, from first-hand experience, I can confidently say that the environmental protection approach in Japan is dangerously outdated. The problem in Japan is largely a societal one, as by far greater importance is placed on construction and economic development than on wildlife conservation.

In the past, the “bottom-up,” locally-managed approach to environmental protection has worked just fine for Japan and, in particular, the giant salamanders. Historically, well-tended rice fields encouraged the development of a plethora of aquatic larvae which in turn provided food for freshwater crabs, frogs, fish and snakes. Such a rich environment and abundance of prey items is necessary for the giant salamanders, particularly younger and less battle-hardened ones, to prosper. However, as farming methods have modernized and the average age of farmers has increased, the excessive use of chemicals has adversely affected the health of the salamander habitats.

### Habitat degradation and destruction

Short of ideas (and imagination) on how to support the ailing local economies, local politicians and town planners in Japan frequently green-light needless and destructive

construction projects, thus accessing funds from the central government. Of course, from time to time, projects such as river-strengthening works are needed to prevent flooding. However, environmental risk assessments are all too frequently inadequate, if they happen at all.

A prime example of these “destruction works” occurred recently in arguably one of the most important habitats for the Japanese giant salamander in the world, the headwaters of the Hino River. Dr. Okada, the world’s leading authority on Japanese giant salamanders, has studied this area extensively over two decades. A long-planned and frequently-postponed forest road upgrade and extension project was given the go-ahead by the local government. Despite Dr. Okada’s attempts to halt it, work began on the project, and parts of the river were diverted through concrete channels. Preparations to send large stretches through a concrete pipe were made and only delayed by Dr. Okada’s pleas to wait at least until after spring to increase the previous year’s larvae’s chance of survival. I simply couldn’t believe it. This project was despite all our hard work in attracting visitors from all over the world to help conserve the salamanders, and the town promoting itself as “salamander friendly.”

*“Environmental risk assessments are all too frequently inadequate”*



### Why are giant salamanders important in Japan?

Flabbergasted, I got in touch with my contacts at the Ministry of Environment and organized an extraordinary meeting between them and the local stakeholders. I’m very happy to say that following the meeting (and once the local people became aware of everything that was going on and voiced their displeasure at it), the construction project was halted all together. Since then, an “Ecotourism Committee” has been established, so there are some signs of progress.

Japanese giant salamanders are at the top of the food chain in their environment. It would be a huge tragedy if they were to become extinct because of human activity, especially when much of the habitat destruction is completely unnecessary. By conserving them, we can protect their whole habitat and everything in them. We hope that by educating people about the importance of protecting local wildlife, local people will hold their elected officials accountable for how and where their tax dollars are spent.





## Our Japanese giant salamander conservation programme

In the summer of 2017, I was approached by representatives from The Ministry of Environment charged with promoting the Daisen-Okii National Park. They asked me for assistance in establishing a Japanese giant salamander-related eco-tourism project in the area. They had tried a couple of times before but hadn't been able to get it off the ground. As a local wildlife enthusiast, I jumped at the chance of leading the project. Thankfully, this time the project has been successful and we have welcomed guests to Daisen-Okii from all the world. For many wildlife fans, the Japanese giant salamander is a "bucket list" animal. Through this eco-tourism project, we have collected a great deal of important data to support Dr. Okada's essential work.

Through taking part in our conservation experience, our guests can experience conducting genuine fieldwork with Dr. Okada. He is a legend in his field of expertise and spending time with him in the field is a real privilege. My role is managing logistics and explaining in English some of the many things I have learned about the salamanders from spending lots of time in the field with Dr. Okada. During daylight hours we can see the habitat and perhaps find a salamander and return to our base for an informative lecture/presentation about the salamanders. After enjoying a locally made vegan bento box, we put on headlamps and waders and get into the river in search of Japanese giant

salamanders. Nothing is guaranteed in nature, but we have found at least 3 individuals on each tour so far. When we find any salamanders, we record their biometrics before releasing them safely back into the wild. Please visit our website [Bushido Japan](http://BushidoJapan.com) for further information.

## How I got into salamander conservation

I studied Environmental Management at university and have volunteered in wildlife conservation in Tanzania and Madagascar. In 2009 I qualified as a Field Guide (Safari Guide) in South Africa which was a dream of mine since I was a small boy. In Japan, I worked as a Tour Leader which involved leading groups of non-Japanese around the country for up to two weeks at a time. This gave me valuable experience of the workings of the inbound tourism industry in Japan.

I applied these lessons to the salamander project to make a viable and sustainable ecotourism service that is priced according to demand and supply. Relying on volunteers for important projects is unsustainable in the long term, so I deemed it important that those involved were modestly compensated for their time. Dr. Okada's research is largely self-funded, so I wanted to pay for the data collection itself and also boost his income so that he is able to continue his hard and important work.

It was also clear to me that we should focus on the American market, as ecotourism and wildlife conservation is well-established there. Domestically, ecotourism hasn't really taken off in Japan yet. More than 90 percent of our guests to date have flown in from the U.S. with

the prime objective of taking part in our experience. However, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (we have been able to continue most of our activities, with precautions in place), foreigners based in Japan have begun visiting us more and more.

## Advice for anyone wanting to get involved!

Firstly, please come and join us in the field if you can! We are now working on a new project called "Save the Nawa Salamanders." Research and conservation measures for the Japanese giant salamanders are desperately needed in the Nawa River. Please check our website for news about that and how you can help.

Furthermore, if you have any skills that might be useful in spreading the word and raising awareness, please do get in touch. This could be graphic design skills, marketing experience, etc. If in doubt, please ask!

*Richard Pearce hails from The Cotswolds, England, and was a Tottori JET from 2006-2008. He returned to Mount Daisen, his home-from-home, in Tottori Prefecture in 2010 and has been there ever since working in the tourism industry. He is Company Director of Bushido Adventure Travel Ltd and Owner of Bushido Japanese Language and Culture School and Richiyado Guesthouse.*



# Sugar and spice, and all things kawaii: is that what little girls are made of? ☆

A review of *Beyond Kawaii: Studying Japanese  
Femininities at Cambridge*  
Alice French (Yamagata) ☆



What was the last thing you referred to as '*kawaii*'? As of writing this, the last time I used the word '*kawaii*' was when cooing at a sausage dog wearing a tiny coat, whom I encountered in the street over the weekend. I can neither confirm nor deny whether said sausage dog considered the comment a compliment, but I'm almost certain that he/she was not aware of the gendered and societal nuance underpinning this seemingly innocent adjective.

The now increasingly globalised Japanese word *kawaii* literally translates as 'lovable,' comprised of the Chinese characters 可 (*ka*, meaning possibility/ability) and 愛 (*ai*, meaning love/affection). Over the last few decades, the term has come to encompass all things cute in Japanese popular culture, from anime characters and pop idols, to wedding dresses and lingerie. *Kawaii* is also the default adjective for describing babies, children, pets, and even grandparents. In fact, pretty much anything and anyone can be *kawaii* if you look hard enough.

However, as revealed in the latest book from Cambridge University's Japanese Studies Department, the sociological impact of *kawaii* in Japan stretches far beyond its humble adjectival beginnings. Look hard enough at the plethora of *kawaii* characters, costumes and products available in Japan, and you will notice an undeniable common theme. All are innately, and painfully stereotypically, feminine. This femininity most ostentatiously manifests in the form of the pink, fluffy, and frilly *kawaii*-ness that we all know and love, and more stealthily as the obedient, quiet, and infantile *kawaii*-ness that often goes hand-in-hand with these girly aesthetics. A good example is Japan's famous Hello Kitty character, who is characterised by her disproportionately large eyes, pink or red bow, and lack of mouth (and thus her inability to speak). Although the beloved *kitty-chan* is perhaps an extreme case, this same *kawaii*-fied femininity can also be seen in any doe-eyed, school uniform-wearing, shrill-voiced female anime or manga character, such as family favourite *Sailor Moon*.

*Beyond Kawaii: Studying Japanese Femininities at Cambridge*, edited by Brigitte Steger, Angelika Koch and Christopher Tso, explores this link between the *kawaii* phenomenon and femininity in modern Japan, through the lens of female sexuality, motherhood, body image, fashion, film and literature. As explained in the book's introduction, *kawaii ko* (cute girl) has come to be one of the many ideals that women in Japanese society are expected to aspire to, along with devoted mother, obedient wife and, more recently, career woman. The *kawaii* ideal holds a special



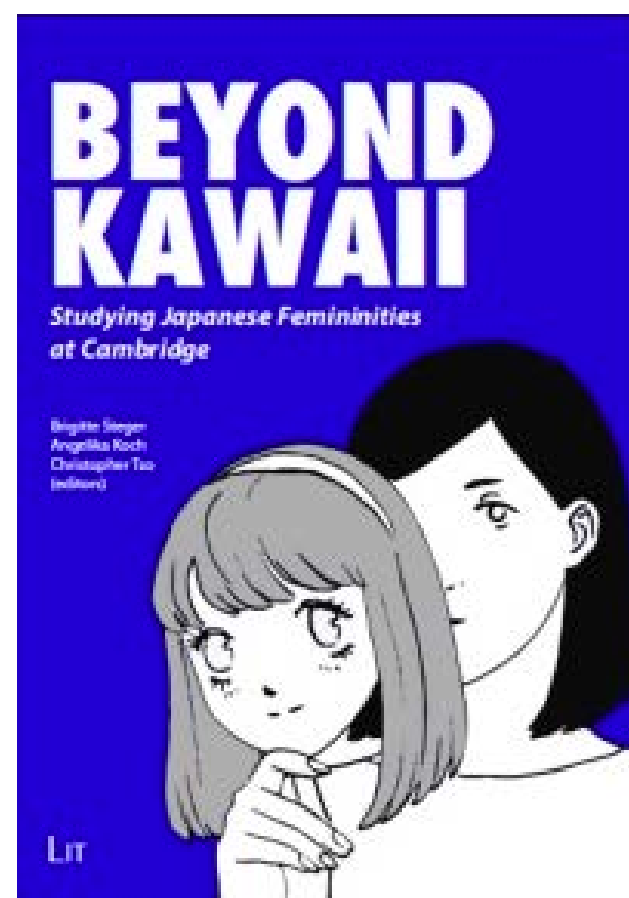


kind of gravitas because of its prominence as “one of Japan’s most successful global exports,” which has “replaced the kimono-clad geisha figure as the dominant image of Japanese women” not just domestically, but all over the world. (12) Although the pink, fluffy kawaii aesthetic may have held some potential for subverting the “orthodox values of social responsibility” expected of women by Japanese society when it first emerged in the 1970s, as it has become more mainstream, the social pressure to be seen as kawaii, not only by men, but also by fellow women, has proved it to be more restrictive than progressive. (13)

Any fellow women (or, indeed, fellow humans) with any experience of living in Japan will no doubt have felt the restrictive force of the kawaii phenomenon first-hand. Youtube adverts from sparkly cosmetic brands promising to up your *kawairashisa* (kawaii-ness) and bag you a boyfriend; well-meaning comments from your co-workers about how kawaii you look, on the one day that you wear your hair down and remove your glasses; accusatory glances from *obaa-chan* on the subway if you sit with your legs open; the list goes on. If you are one of the braver among us who has dipped your toe into the Japanese online (or even, \*gasp,\* real-life) dating scene, you will most likely have been subjected to unsolicited comments such as ‘you’d be so kawaii if you just lost a bit of weight,’ or ‘you’re *kirei* (pretty) right now, but you were so much more kawaii in that picture of you with longer hair from 2 years ago.’ The power of kawaii even extends into the workplace; note how female colleagues often raise the pitch of their voices at least a couple of tones when taking phone calls (whereas male colleagues’ voices remain unchanged), and cover their mouths or stare at the floor when laughing/giggling in the office. After nearly two years of working in a Japanese office, I’ve found myself picking up some of these kawaii-fied habits almost automatically.

As the title suggests, *Beyond Kawaii* delves into some of the ways that Japanese women are attempting to, or being expected to, expand their feminine identity outside of the confines of the kawaii ideal in modern society. Against the backdrop of Japan’s aging society and Abe Shinzō’s disappointing ‘womenomics’ policy, the book provides a unique and refreshing perspective on Japanese femininity that extends beyond the solely maternal and economic roles that have dominated English language research into Japanese women thus far.

Chapter One’s investigation into the recent *shikyūkei* (uterus-type) and *chitsukei* (vagina-type) spirituality trend is especially interesting, as it sheds light on a hitherto largely unknown and unresearched aspect of the Japanese women’s movement. In this chapter, Ellen Mann looks at the presentation of this new form of spirituality, which encourages women to harness their feminine energy and happiness through



forming a deeper connection with their reproductive organs, in women’s magazines and online platforms. This movement, which is one result of the growing interest in ‘spirituality’ in Japan since the 1980s, calls for women to practice special vagina-strengthening exercises, masturbate, and even examine their menstrual blood, all in the name of getting more in touch with their ‘feminine’ selves.

I found Mann’s research especially fascinating when compared to the current move towards sexual liberation and sex positivity for women (and all non cis-het males) that is so prevalent on Western social media (particularly Instagram) at the moment. Whereas the Western movement is more about women reclaiming their bodies and sexuality as a form of liberation from the restraints of traditional expectations of femininity, Mann finds that *shikyūkei* and *chitsukei* approaches to female self-improvement ultimately “replicate rather than resolve the pressures facing contemporary Japanese women.” (74) This is because, in Japan, the practice is not a form of personal liberation but a method of self-improvement, aimed at making women more attractive and useful to society. The movement can therefore be seen as an addition, rather than an alternative, to the other burdens placed on modern women (such as having to juggle childcare with maintaining a career). I highly recommend Mann’s research to readers of any gender, not least because it is brilliant fodder to spice up the small talk during your next coffee break at work.

As someone who has struggled with heightened body consciousness pretty much daily since moving to Japan, I also found Chapter Five, in which Anna Ellis-Rees discusses the dynamic between Japan’s kawaii phenomenon and its body positivity movement, very engaging. Focusing on the trend of ‘chubby’ (*puniko*) girl idol groups and the messages of supposed body positivity

and fat positivity that they promote, Ellis-Rees investigates whether the “soft, round and squishy” version of the kawaii ideal that has emerged over the last decade offers any respite from the traditional pressure on Japanese girls to be small, slim and lady-like. As you can probably guess, her conclusion is that it does not, but this chapter provides a meticulously-researched insight into Japan’s diet culture and its attitude towards the ideal female body, which I’m sure many readers will relate to.

The above two chapters are just my personal highlights, but all essays in *Beyond Kawaii* are well worth reading. Tianyi Vespera Xie talks about the pressures of modern motherhood as well as the potential for the *ikemen dansō* cosplay trend to subvert gender norms. Alexander Russell introduces us to award-winning author Kanehara Hitomi’s novel ‘Trip Trap’ and the ways in which it deals with the multi-faceted and, quite frankly, exhausting challenges of being a modern Japanese woman. Ellis-Rees also has another brilliantly-written chapter on the destructive power of a woman scorned, as expressed in J-Horror films of the 1990s and 2000s. Whichever aspect of Japanese culture you are interested in, there will be a chapter for you. What’s more, it’s International Women’s Day this month, so what better time to expand your knowledge of Japanese femininity beyond the inescapable kawaii ideal?

*Beyond Kawaii: Studying Japanese Femininities at Cambridge* is available on Amazon [here](#)

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 or skiing on one of Yamagata’s many mountains.



My “journey” to interview various artists across Japan has taken me to a remote area of Hokkaidō —although through the Internet, of course! Although travel is limited at this time, I was able to connect with photographer Colette English online. Her work is so breathtaking that I was absolutely amazed that she is primarily self-taught. Then again, artists always seem to make their own way, and it seems that her life in rural Hokkaidō has given her an opportunity to perfect her new passion. Anyway, it was a pleasure to interview her, and hope you enjoy her thoughts about wildlife and landscape photography.

**J** Where are you from, where are you located in Japan, and what made you decide to come here?

**C** I’m from Monterey, California and currently live in coastal Eastern Hokkaidō. I had previously visited Japan as an exchange student at Okayama University and majored in Japanese Language and Culture at California State University Monterey Bay. To me JET was an obvious next step from there.

**J** When did you start photographing wildlife/landscapes? What got you into it?

**C** I came to Hokkaidō with my nice point-and-shoot Sony RX100 and while traveling on weekends I fell in love with the natural landscape surrounding me. This on its own wasn’t the push that brought me to where I’m at now though. That happened about six months later. During winter vacation, I went back home to be with my family for Christmas and during this time I was itching to upgrade from my point-and-shoot to a DSLR. This brought me to purchasing the Sony a6000 bundle that came with a zoom lens.

## IT WAS ONE PHOTO FROM THAT DAY THAT FULLY PULLED ME INTO THE WORLD OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND ESPECIALLY WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

Since I had already invested a good amount of money into the camera, I wanted to learn how to use it properly. When I came back from my trip, I immediately signed up for online courses with the New York Institute of Photography. This is where I received most of my basic technical knowledge.

About a month after taking the course, I was out in Akan with a friend and we decided to go and see the red-crowned crane sanctuary. I had my new camera with the zoom lens with me, hoping to test out my new knowledge on these endangered cranes. It was one photo from that day that fully pulled me into the world of photography and especially wildlife photography.

This sanctuary feeds the cranes dried corn daily and they sometimes do a special feeding of fresh fish around noon that also attracts eagles in the area. This is a big selling point and what draws many to this sanctuary. Here, you have the chance of capturing an interaction of a crane and an eagle in a photograph. With my still budding knowledge of photography, I was able to capture a photo of this special encounter. The end photo wasn’t good by any means but I was hooked from then on.

## PHOTOGRAPHING THE WILDLIFE AND LANDSCAPE OF HOKKAIDŌ

INTERVIEW WITH COLETTE ENGLISH





**J** How often do you take photographs? What is your process like?

**C** Photography is almost always on my mind. Even while I'm driving I'll look at scenes of the outdoors that I am passing by and be able to mentally compose a shot. I take photos almost every time I'm out solo traveling and I just choose locations that speak to me. Instagram and Pashadelic are my best sources when it comes to planning a shoot.

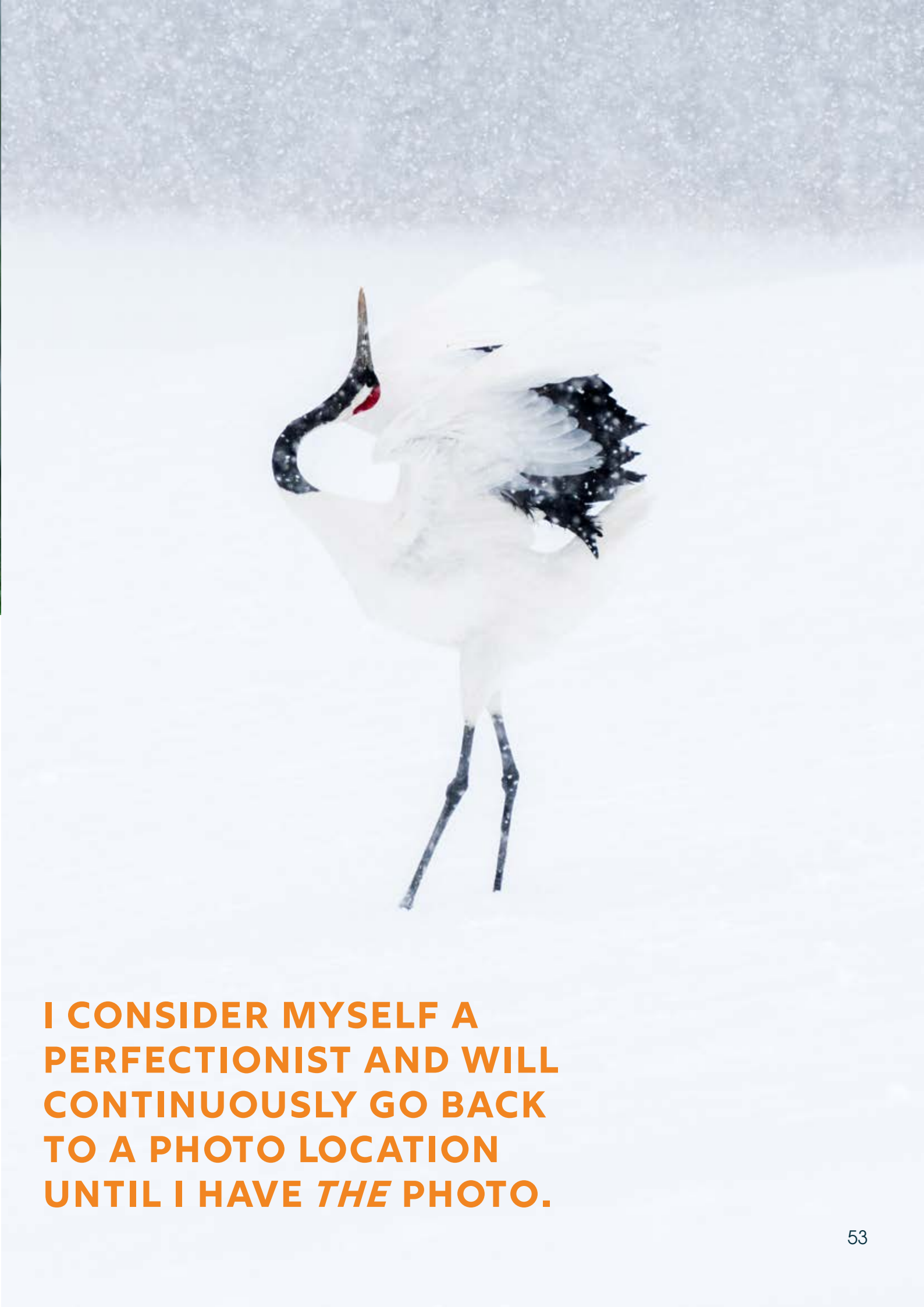
Some locations take more planning than others and as I've gotten better at taking photos, I keep trying for more rare occurrences. This usually includes photographing locations or wildlife in bad weather. Sometimes I go as far as to research if a location has a live camera nearby so I can truly know if it is snowing. I consider myself a perfectionist and will continuously go back to a photo location until I have *the* photo. An extreme example of this is my need to visit the Izumi Crane Sanctuary every year during my annual winter road trip. This sanctuary is located all the

way down in Kyūshū while all of my other photo locations are in Chūbu and Tōhoku.

**J** One thing that really impresses me about your work is the level of attention it must take. Would think that one of the challenges of wildlife photography is the timing, since animals move so quickly. How do you go about getting the "perfect shot?"

**C** In one word, it's persistence. Whether that means waiting outside in horrible weather for hours or continuously going to the same location time and time again, the saying "practice makes perfect" is what it boils down to. Usually my first time at a location is practice. I still don't know exactly what I want and just shoot everything I can find. From there I think back on the event to see what I did right or wrong, and what quirk I want to try and capture from that animal or bird. Of course, you sometimes just get lucky.

**I CONSIDER MYSELF A PERFECTIONIST AND WILL CONTINUOUSLY GO BACK TO A PHOTO LOCATION UNTIL I HAVE *THE* PHOTO.**





**J** What inspires you as a photographer?

**C** Fellow photographers in Japan inspire me with all of their amazing photos on Instagram. They keep me on my toes and make me want to visit new, amazing locations. Also the journey is sometimes more rewarding than the destination. That's why my Instagram username is @journey\_to\_inspiration. Sometimes I'll spot something off the side of the road and—since this is Japan—I'll just stop the car, turn on my hazards, get out of the car, and start shooting.

**J** Are there any themes or ideas that you feel influence your work?

**C** Not really. Anything that catches my eye is game.

**J** What was your experience in photography before coming to Japan?

**C** My entire photography journey started in Japan. Before this I was just taking snapshots like most people.

**J** What advice do you have for people who are interested in taking their photography to the next level?

**C** Find something that keeps the passion alive. I'm very isolated and I can't go full-blown crazy photographer with most of my friends. I joined online groups to interact with fellow photographers so I could talk about my passion with those that understand. I know some people say to just keep shooting, but that can cause burnout. There's nothing wrong with taking breaks.

*Colette is a sixth-year JET from California now living in Eastern Hokkaidō. She started her photography journey in Japan back in 2015 with a Sony RX100 point-and-shoot camera. Since then she has upgraded her gear to photograph her true passions: wildlife and landscapes. She pairs her love of photography with going on grand road trips across Japan. When not taking photos she is procrastinating by whittling down and editing said photos. You can see more of her photography on her Instagram [here](#) or on her [website](#).*

*Jessica is a fourth-year American JET from Arkansas state now living in Saitama. She is the art section editor for **CONNECT**. On weekends she enjoys hiking in remote areas of Saitama or taking day-trips to Tōkyō. When not adventuring, she can be found reading or creating her own artwork, which can be seen on her Instagram [@jessica\\_craven\\_art](#).*





# ToCo: The Tokyo Collective

Latest Edition,  
*matsuri*, Out Now!

Jessica Craven (Saitama)

"The Tokyo Collective" (ToCo) is an artist collective that combines experiences of Tōkyō into anthology zines. Since their fourth edition, *matsuri*, (festival), became available for purchase just last month, now is a great time to learn more about their publications, the project history, and a bit about the participating artists!

## The Beginning: *hajime*

"The Tokyo Collective" is a project that illustrators Erica Ward and Julia Nascimento launched in 2018. They say it emerged out of an irrepressible desire to work with other local creatives in Tōkyō: particularly, to join forces, to share ideas and experiences, and to tell stories together. The words of Erica Ward in the foreword of their first edition, *hajime*, particularly shed light on some of the ideas and inspiration that motivated the duo to undertake this new creative endeavor:

"To a hundred different people, Tōkyō is a hundred different cities. Here we introduce you to seven of those different cities through the illustrations, comics, and writings of seven non-Tōkyō-native artists. Each has submitted a four-page artwork with no other guidelines than the theme: "First Impressions of Tōkyō."

Our title, *hajime*, represents the memories of the start of our new lives in Tōkyō, but also represents the start of this new endeavor to create a collaborative zine.

Like those first memories of Tōkyō, *hajime* is the excitement and the uncertainty of jumping into something new. . . ."

*hajime* features five additional artists: Tania Vicedo, "Kittyzilla," Erina Suzuki, Michele Laudig, and Natalie Bleakly. A public exhibition was held along with the release of the book to showcase the participating artists' work at Tokyo Chapter Ninetytwo 13 Gallery.

## "monogatari"

In the words of Julia Nascimento, their second edition, *monogatari*(story), assembles "twice the number of contributors telling stories in a completely different way, giving the anthology a strength born from diversity." This anthology was also published in 2018.

In the *monogatari* anthology, the artists depict the overwhelming number of inanimate objects in Tōkyō in various ways. Personally, when I think of Tōkyō, I am often reminded of Japanese architect Toshiko Mori's quote describing the city: "More than any other city, Tōkyō demonstrates that 'city' is a verb and not a noun." In a city full of so many people always on the move . . . in a city that is likewise always being changed by them and packed with consumerism of the ever-changing trends, it only makes sense that every corner is somehow packed with some sort of object. Erica Ward puts it more poetically in the foreword of this second edition:

Tōkyō is known to be one of the most populous cities in the world. However, it is not just crowded with people. Everywhere you look you will find them: objects . . . items . . . things.

Though Tōkyō is, of course, abundant in vibrant human stories, it surely also holds countless stories of its unspeaking objects.

For ToCo's second issue, we've compiled short tales of Tōkyō's things.

From a tiny key to giant skyscrapers, 14 artists and writers have brought the inanimate to life through diverse narrative and visual styles.

"Monogatari," the Japanese word for tale or story, means literally "to tell of things."

We hope you enjoy this collection as our artists do just that."



The 14 artists featured in this second edition are:

Carin Ogawa,  
Chizuko Tanaka,  
Craig Atkinson,  
Erica Ward,  
Felipe Kolb Bernardes,  
Jessica Whitfield,  
Julia Nascimento,  
Kaori Noda,  
Lori Ono,  
Louis-Etienne Vallee,  
Mariko Jesse,  
"Odding,"  
Shingo Nagasaki,  
and Tania Vicedo.

As with the first issue, a public exhibition that coincided with the issue's release to showcase the participating artists' work was held at Tokyo Chapter Ninetytwo 13 Gallery.





## himitsu

ToCo's third edition, *himitsu* was published in 2019, featured 11 artists, and centers around the numerous secrets that the colossal population of Tōkyō must keep hidden.

Despite the sheer number of people in Japan, the generally reserved nature of Japanese people in public places often makes everyone seem orderly, anonymous, and indecipherable. Something about seeing what's behind the stoic facades of people in Japan or peering behind their closed doors is sure to pique many readers' interest.

Erica Ward describes Tōkyō as a "city overflowing with secrets: happenings behind closed doors, down quiet alleyways, and even simply in our imaginations . . . Imagination paints possibilities from secret hobbies of Tōkyō residents to unknown forces at work behind the city itself."

The 13 artists featured in *himitsu* (secret) are: Jessica Whitfield, "Majico," Julia Nascimento, Takao Yoshida, Lori Ono, Mariko Jesse, "Odding," Erica Ward, Natalie Bleakly, Qiraat Cunningham, Natalie Andrewson, Rebecca Niita, and Felipe Kolb Bernardes. A public reception featuring these artists' work, along with the release of the issue, was held at August Moon Cafe 2F Gallery.

## The New Edition: matsuri

ToCo's fourth and latest edition, *matsuri*, was published in December of 2020 and became available for purchase just last month.

The topic of matsuri, or Japanese festivals, was decided upon in early February of 2020, just before the coronavirus pandemic altered any sense of normalcy around the world. Although the vast majority of festivals have been cancelled in Japan throughout the past year, Erica Ward notes that the situation ended up giving the issue even more meaning as it has become a means to experience a variety of Tōkyō festivals when doing so in-person is not an option. Overall, the anthology is a way to remember and relive better times and imagine the matsuri to come in the future.

This fourth edition has also served as a means of bringing artists and readers together during a time when most exhibitions and gatherings are not possible. It features their largest group of participating artists to date, consisting of: "Odding," "Majico," Jas Carpenter, Mariko Jesse, Lori Ono, Maira M. Moura, Erica Ward, Monica, Kaori Noda, BigFatDog Comics, Janay Baade, Carlos Sulpizio, Julia Nascimento, Candace Fujii, and J. Scuderi.

Although the pandemic has made it impossible to hold a public exhibition of the featured artists' as has been held for every other issue, hopefully the general uneventfulness of the times will permit more readers the downtime to pick up this latest issue and connect with the artists and their stories through the page. Since it is likely that people have turned to more and more screen-time as we are isolated in our own homes, I think it makes the physical presence of a printed and beautifully-designed self-published comic book all the more comforting. There is something about a tangible work of art that you can view directly and touch that the Internet and webcomics cannot replace, especially when we are probably receiving less visual stimulation and experiences from the

outside world than usual. I am hopeful that the state of this world will improve with the vaccine beginning to be distributed in Japan, but until then, *matsuri* is filled with elaborate and charming other worlds to escape to!

This latest issue can be purchased through their website [here](#) for only \$9.50 USD (about 1000 yen). The second and third issues can also be purchased for the same price, and the first issue, *hajime*, is only \$7.50 USD.

*Jessica is a fourth-year American JET from Arkansas state now living in Saitama. She is the Art Section Editor for **CONNECT**. On weekends, she enjoys hiking in remote areas of Saitama or taking day-trips to Tōkyō. When not adventuring, she can be found reading or creating her own artwork, which can be seen on her Instagram [@jessica\\_craven\\_art](#).*



Odding  
Majico  
Jas Carpenter  
Mariko Jesse  
Lori Ono  
Maira M. Moura  
Erica Ward  
Mónica  
Kaori Noda  
BigFatDog Comics  
Janay Baade  
Carlos Sulpizio  
Julia Nascimento  
Candace Fujii  
J. Scuderi

*matsuri* fifteen artists' festivals and celebrations of Tokyo



# LIFESTYLE

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### Clare Braganza

*"Anyone who isn't embarrassed of who they were last year probably isn't learning enough." — Alain de Botton*

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## SPORTS EDITOR

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### Kayla Francis

*"I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better." — Maya Angelou*

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## LIFESTYLE DESIGNER

Rhiannon Haseltine





# Eating Wild

## by Winifred Bird

Discovering More About The Land  
Around Us Kayla Francis, Anne Yi, Katie Ehrlich (Tōkyō)

*This article contains recipes and extracts originally published in "Eating Wild."*

Now more than ever, Japanese cooking is prevalent. Go to any bookstore, regardless of the country, and you are sure to find titles from *The Just Bento Cookbook* and *Sushi Taste and Technique* to *Japanese Soul Cooking* and *Japanese Farm Food*. Very rarely, however, do you find a Japanese cookbook that encourages you to go out and not just find the ingredients yourself, but seek the plants you easily excuse as weeds.

*Eating Wild* isn't your typical cookbook—it's also an anthology of beautifully written essays detailing Winifred Bird's time exploring the *inaka* of Japan. Bird doesn't just awaken our curiosity in *sansai* (the Japanese word for mountain vegetables), chestnuts, bamboo and seaweed. She shows us the connection that food has to the land around us. That food, as we often forget in the city, comes from somewhere, and with it, a rich history. Most importantly, Bird reminds us that plants come from the very planet that we live on and have to protect for our own survival. *Eating Wild* isn't just a book dedicated to lesser-known produce hidden in Japan's countryside; it's an exhibit on sustainable living, remembering the food of our past, and eating what is in abundance.

My personal experience of eating in *ryokan* (Japanese-style inns) has always been a curiosity, but other than admiring how pretty each dish was, I never stopped to question what exactly I was eating. The tales Bird describes of visiting a chef and preparing the dishes with him—"batter lightly; wild *tempura* is more attractive if the green shows through"—brought back memories of the dishes I had eaten. It wasn't until reading this section of the book that I fully appreciated where that food had come from and how much effort goes into preparing each dish. Bird emphasises this by embedding the recipes into her essays.

Though an education on food is never a bad thing, how does *Eating Wild* actually work as a cookbook? Is it worth experimenting with *sansai*? We decided to try a couple of recipes out for ourselves.

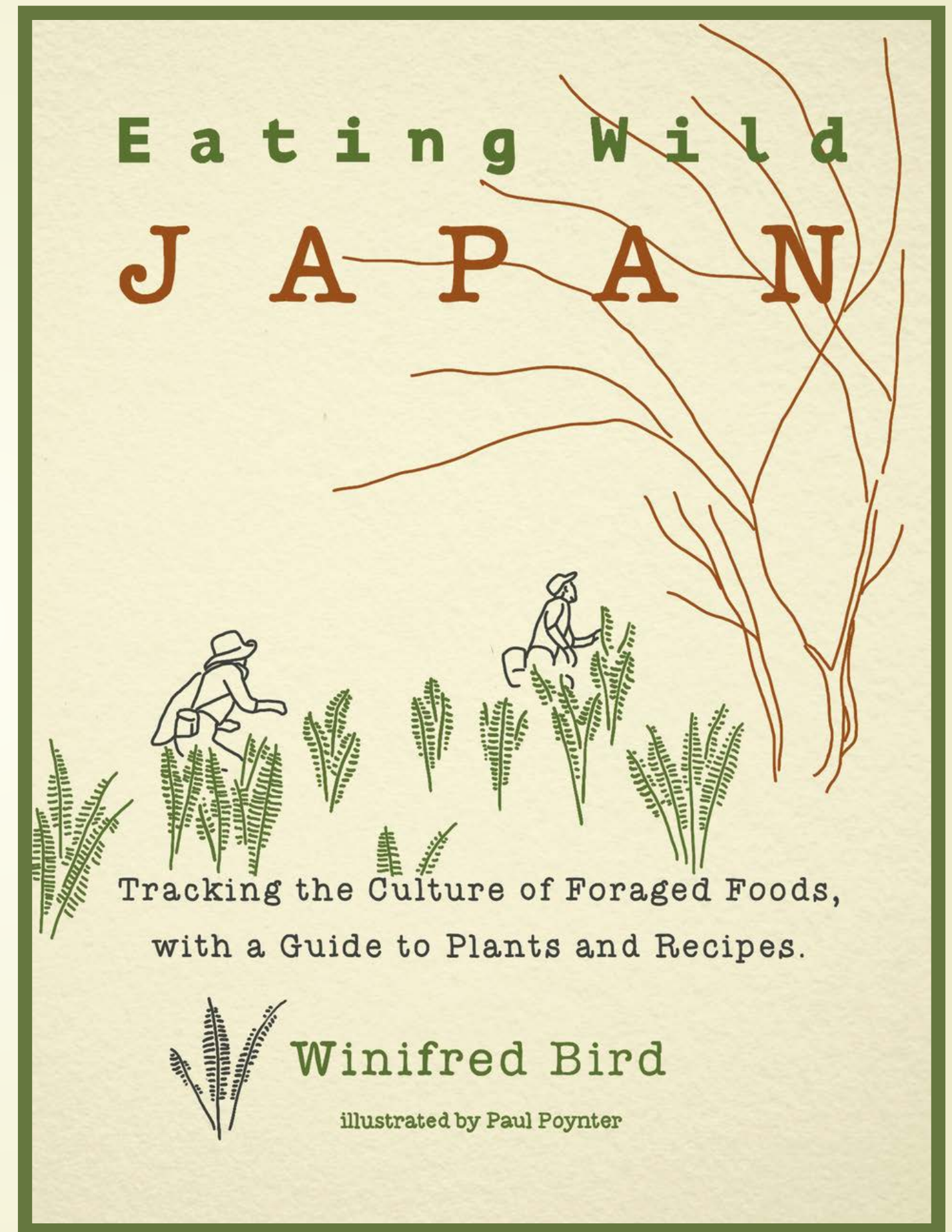






Photo: Katie Ehrlich



# Mitsuba no Tamagotoji

Anne Yi

After a long workday, you're hungry and dragging your feet back home. You don't feel like eating shoulder to shoulder with a salaryman, nor do you feel like getting junky fast food. What could be better than a hot, comforting meal that takes no time at all to make and is cheap? The meal should not cost more than 200 yen per person in total.

This simple egg dish makes for a quick weeknight dinner and uses ingredients readily available at all Japanese supermarkets. The only ingredient that you might not al-

ready have in your fridge is 'mitsuba,' which looks and tastes like a mixture between parsley and coriander/cilantro. The flavour is subtle and adds a nice touch to the eggs, which are silky and delicate. Flavoured with dashi, mirin, and soy sauce, it tastes similar to the comforting and familiar *oyakodon* (chicken and egg on rice). Using a *konbu* dashi, this would make for a good vegetarian meal. Give it a shot.

## Mitsuba no Tamagotoji

A cousin of the classic oyakodon—"parent and child rice bowl" made with chicken, sliced onions, mitsuba, and eggs—this comforting homestyle dish is surprisingly delicious with mitsuba alone. Tofu makes a nice vegetarian alternative to chicken if you want a more substantial dish; simply break up a cake of soft tofu into the pan before adding the eggs.

**Servings: 2**

### Ingredients:

15 stalks mitsuba with leaves attached  
2 large eggs  
1/3 cup dashi  
2 tsp soy sauce  
2 tsp mirin  
2 tsp sake

### Instructions:

1. Chop the mitsuba into one-inch lengths. Lightly beat the eggs.
2. Bring the dashi, soy sauce, mirin, and sake to a simmer in a small frying pan.
3. Add the mitsuba and cook until just wilted, about 20 seconds. Pour the eggs over the mitsuba, cover, and cook for about 1 minute until barely set.







# Wakame Shabu-Shabu

Katie Ehrlich

I have to admit, I made a few changes to this recipe. I wanted to make it for a (very hungry) group of six. So I got double the veggies and a little more than 1.5 kilos of shabu-shabu meat. I also got a combination of *eringi* mushrooms and shiitake mushrooms, since *eringis* are these lovely, large mushrooms that taste meaty in a hotpot. Also, fresh wakame is difficult to find, but honestly, to me, it tastes exactly the same as dried wakame, so it's a safe bet (and cheaper) to just get that. Buying everything here in Tōkyō at a grocery store called Hanamasa, everything cost 4,222 yen, about \$40 for the six of us—a little less than \$7 per person—so it was a great way to feed a crowd for cheap. I did have the sake, wakame, konbu, and seasonings at home, so you'll probably have to get those, though they are great cupboard essentials and can be used for many delicious dishes!

Making things here in Tōkyō is just like making things in any city of the world, where local fruits and vegetables and high-turnover items will invariably be cheaper here. But I know, at least, in the United States, it was easy to find them at Asian supermarkets or online. Making it was quite simple: just thinly slicing the veggies and setting them out on the table, setting out the meat (it was pre-sliced), bringing the pot to boil, and dipping the ingredients! We left the veggies in so they could cook through a little more. Pro tip—cook the *udon* in a strainer so it doesn't get lost in the soup; this makes it easier to serve and stops it from going mushy! Overall, this recipe is a classic shabu-shabu recipe and a great way to feed a crowd for a reasonable price. I recommend trying it out!

## Wakame Shabu-Shabu

Shabu-shabu is a hotpot meal in which diners swish thinly sliced pieces of vegetables, meat, or fish through a clay pot of broth kept simmering over a burner at the table. Nearly all Japanese families own one of these single-burner ranges fired by a small canister of gas, which are essential for hotpot eating because they allow ingredients to move from platter to broth to mouth in a matter of seconds. In the USA, similar ranges are sold as portable butane stoves for outdoor use and are well worth the investment if you like homestyle, Japanese cooking. Wakame shabu-shabu can be as simple as a pot of water, a pile of fresh wakame, and a sauce or two to dip it in. This more elaborate version is adapted from a pamphlet on the seaweed cooking of the Noto Peninsula published by the Ishikawa New Agriculture Total Support Organization.

Servings: 4

## Ingredients:

- Fresh wakame
- 8 fresh shiitake or large white mushrooms
- 1 large carrot
- 1/2 daikon radish
- 1 package firm (*momen*) tofu
- 1/2 lb thinly sliced pork with some fat (optional)
- 6-inch x 6-inch piece of konbu
- 6 cups water
- 1/4 cup sake
- 1 1/2 tsp salt
- Store-bought ponzu sauce for serving (a mixture of soy sauce and lemon juice can be substituted)
- Store-bought sesame sauce for serving (optional)
- 2 single-serving packages of fresh udon noodles

## Instructions:

1. Wash the wakame and cut into lengths measuring several inches long. Remove the mushroom stems. Use a peeler to shave the carrot and daikon into long, thin strips. Drain the tofu and cut into 8 cubes. Arrange these ingredients attractively on a large serving plate. Arrange the pork, if using, on a separate plate.

2. Place the konbu, water, sake, and salt in a clay hotpot or large sauce-pan and begin heating it over a portable range at the table. Set out a small bowl for each diner, into which they can pour a small amount of either sauce.

3. When the broth comes to a boil, reduce heat to a low simmer. Diners should pick up ingredients from the serving dish with their chopsticks and swish through the broth until just cooked, then dip into their bowl of sauce and enjoy. When all the ingredients have been eaten, the meal can be finished by briefly simmering the udon noodles in the flavorful broth. Alternately, use the broth to make a savory porridge for breakfast the next morning—just bring to a simmer, add about one bowl of rice per cup of broth, cook over low heat for 5 minutes, and stir in 2 beaten eggs immediately before serving.



The joy of this book is not just the recipes and stories that Bird shares with her audience, but also the conversations she starts. Through reading this book and creating the recipes together, we were encouraged to discuss the key themes—noticeably, the climate issues that arise. Life in Tōkyō is not sustainable, and we continue to see an overabundance in plastic usage. This book opens the conversation to another way of living and using what we have on hand. For this city girl, though I am passionate about food, the thought of looking for food would never have occurred to me. *Eating Wild* offers some guidance and comfort for those who are starting out and those like me who have no idea where the starting point even is. I genuinely appreciated the conclusion essay dedicated to the people of *Ainu*, the indigenous people of Japan in Hokkaidō. Despite living here for almost two years, I have seen very little about them. *Eating Wild* is not just a cookbook; it's an ode to the Japanese countryside and the people, food, and history within it.

*Eating Wild* will be available **from March 2021**.

Winifred Bird is a writer, translator, lifelong cook, and lover of plants both wild and domesticated. From 2005 through 2014, she lived in rural Japan, where she worked as an environmental journalist, grew organic rice and vegetables, and ate as many foraged foods as possible. She currently lives with her family in northern Illinois.

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*Katie Ehrlich is a Tōkyō Metropolitan public school JET from Colorado, USA. She is a language-learner, hiker, biker, Tōkyō tiny kitchen chef, and artist.*



L: Winifred Bird, author  
B: Paul Poynter, illustrator







How much trust is there in the officials?

As the total number of COVID-19 cases surpasses 400,000 in Japan, Tōkyō accounting for about a quarter of that, and an extension of the second state of emergency to Mar. 7, the fate of the 2020 Summer Olympics and Paralympics, which was already pushed back to July and August 2021, is again under considerable spotlight. Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and his cabinet are scrambling to make last-minute decisions and reassurances to combat the sharp downturn of public opinion.

According to a survey from Kyodo News, conducted over the weekend of Jan. 9–10, “around 80 percent of people in Japan believe the postponed Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics [...] should be canceled or rescheduled.”

The same survey also found that 68.3 percent were “dissatisfied” with the implemented COVID-19 measures, and 79.2 percent said that the second state of emergency was declared “too late.”

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# The True Cost of COVID-19 and the 2020 Summer Games

Joby Zhang (Tōkyō)



Only 14.1 percent support holding the Summer Games this year.

Despite having such detrimental numbers being reported, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the Tōkyō Games organizing committee, and the Japanese government are adamant on the games happening this summer.

The previous Tōkyō Games organizing committee president, Yoshiro Mori, has been quoted saying that another postponement is “absolutely impossible,” in an event organized by Kyodo News on Jan. 12.

“Having the slightest sense of uncertainty impacts everything. All I can say is that we will go ahead with our preparations. There will be morning even after a long night. Let’s work together to overcome this major challenge,” Mori assured.

Following a resolute statement from Mori, the IOC President Thomas Bach also voiced certainty of the Games opening on July 23. But skepticism surrounds Bach’s own comment, where he said, “[. . .] there is no plan B and this is why we are fully committed to make these games safe and successful.”

In regards to the possibility of reducing the number of spectators, or outright having none, Bach then went on to mention, “You may not like it but sacrifices will be needed. This is why I’m saying, safety first, and no taboo in the discussion to ensure safety.”

“(We) encourage all the Olympic and Paralympic participants who are offered vaccination to accept it, also as an act of solidarity with the Japanese hosts and their fellow participants [. . .] [but] vaccination will not be obligatory,” Bach said.

In a meeting with the Japanese Olympic Committee (JOC) councilors on Feb. 3rd, Mori’s response to the question regarding the JOC’s policy to increase female board members by more than 40 percent made headlines worldwide.



**Yoshiro Mori, Wikimedia Commons**

The Asahi Shimbun reported on Mori’s demeaning comments stating that the increase of women will make “meetings drawn out” and how the current seven women board members “all know how to behave.”

The comments were met with public outcry, forcing Mori to announce his resignation a week later. Despite the scandal, he pointed to former president of the Japan Football Association, 84-year old Saburo Kawabuchi, as the replacement for the next head of the JOC.

This move proved to be terribly erroneous. Public backlash over “closed-door politics” promptly cleared the drawing board as the selection panel, headed by Canon Inc. Chairman Fujio Mitarai, worked to find the next president.

Despite the JOC’s and PM Suga’s guarantee of an open and transparent selection process, meetings of the selection panel were off-the-record. The committee also refused to confirm the members that make up the panel.

As the start of the domestic leg of the torch relay is soon to begin in Fukushima, the 56-year old House of Councilors member, Seiko Hashimoto, was chosen as the captain to weather this storm. Hashimoto has a wealth of qualifications: from being the first female head of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party’s upper house member, to being minister in charge of the Olympics, women’s empowerment and gender equality, to a seven-time Olympian. However, there is still an air of uncertainty that surrounds her.

Although sponsors and a majority of the public support the appointment of Hashimoto, some of them, notably the president of Toyota Motor Corp., Akio Toyoda, have voiced concerns about the lack of communication between the athletes, the public, and the selection panel.

There are also questions about Hashimoto’s personal connections to Mori as she was a member of the intraparty faction that was headed by the former PM, as well as other scandals.

In 2014, Hashimoto was embroiled in a sexual harassment scandal where she forcefully kissed Vancouver Olympic figure skater bronze medalist Daisuke Takahashi. Takahashi later denied such harassment, but the public believes that he was pressured into making the statement.

Again, in September 2020, then Olympic minister, Hashimoto spoke to The Japan Times saying, “I think we have to hold the games at any cost. I want to concentrate all our efforts on measures against the coronavirus.”

Fast forward 3-months to December, Hashimoto admitted to having dined out with five other people in a high-end sushi restaurant. This was only 6 days after the Japanese government implemented new COVID-19 restrictions in an effort to curb the spread.

Hashimoto’s comments over holding the games were in response to remarks made a day prior by IOC Vice President John Coates, head of IOC’s coordination commission.

“It will take place with or without COVID. The Tōkyō Games will start on July 23 next year,” Coates told the French news agency Agence France-Presse.

From another survey conducted by Kyodo News in July 2020, about 23.9 percent responded in favor of holding the Summer Games as scheduled in 2021.

About 70 percent of respondents think that the Tōkyō Games should be postponed or canceled.







## Vaccination is the key, but is it too little, too late?

Contrary to what the Japanese and IOC officials are trying to paint, experts are hesitant to agree with them.

The director of the Infectious Diseases Center at Rinku General Medical Center, Masaya Yamato, is unsure whether the games can continue, especially with the “Host Town Initiative” in place.

According to a statement from the Cabinet Public Relations Office, the initiative is to encourage “globalization, revitalization of local areas and promoting inbound tourism [. . .] [by] trying human, economic and cultural exchanges with the participating countries/regions.”

“I worry about the emergence of a new variant spreading rapidly through interactions between athletes and local communities of the team’s host towns,” Yamato said.

In regards to vaccination, Yasuhiro Kanatani, a professor of clinical pharmacology at Tokai University, warns that different vaccines will provide different outcomes so “it’s important to determine in advance which type of vaccine to use” and “stricter control measures will have to be taken” with international visitors.

Kanatani says, “Giving athletes access to vaccines, having them take multiple tests and restricting their movement upon arrival in Japan” are measures which can be taken to protect them and the Japanese public.

As much haste as the government is making, vaccination in Japan will be a monumental task due to the recent vaccine shortages and the deeply rooted skeptical outlook about vaccines in general.

So far, only the vaccine made by Pfizer and BioNTech has applied for emergency approval. If all goes well, the inoculation program can be started as early as late February, said Health Minister Norihisa Tamura.

The Japanese government also has contracts with the companies that produce the Moderna and AstraZeneca vaccines.

Clinical trials of the Moderna vaccine will begin in late January, with the second doses concluding in early March, and blood samples sent and analyzed in April.

But recent news of Pfizer halving vaccine deliveries until mid-February to upgrade its plant and AstraZeneca’s announcement of cutting deliveries in February and March by 60 percent has disrupted vaccination plans of governments around the world.

**In a study published in the Lancet in September 2020, Japan is consistently ranked among countries with the lowest confidence in vaccines. With only 8.9 percent strongly agreeing that vaccines are safe and 14.7 percent strongly agreeing that vaccines are effective.**

Japan’s distrust in vaccines can be found in the early 1990s inoculation of a combined shot of measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR), which some suspected led to higher rates of aseptic meningitis. Despite no related link between the two, lawsuits were filed against the Japanese government. The unease worsened with the mishandling of the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine in 2013 by government officials. The vaccination for HPV dropped from about 70.6 percent in the late 1990s birth cohort to 0.6 percent in the 2000 birth cohort.

“Japan has had a negative history with vaccines for the past 30 years, with the government lacking sufficient efforts to enlighten the public. Mass media is also to blame for overemphasizing the risks of vaccines and all but ignoring the benefits brought about by them,” Dr. Kentaro Iwata, professor and head of infectious diseases department at Kobe University Hospital, said.

“So it’s not easy to change people’s mindset all of a sudden, but if you look at the data, it’s clear as day that it’s better to have the shots,” he added.

According to a poll by the Yomiuri Shimbun in December of 2020, 84 percent said they would be vaccinated for COVID, but an overwhelming majority of 69 percent said they wanted to wait. Only 15 percent of the respondents said they would opt to receive it immediately.

If a special exception is made for the Summer Games and vaccinations are not a requirement for athletes as Bach has previously said, “all the

economic and emotional pain caused by closing the borders and restricting domestic movement and activity could be wasted,” reports Joel Fitzpatrick of Kyodo News.

“Conquering the coronavirus comes before everything else. If you don’t like the lockdown or other measures that severely restrict our social lives, then the best thing would be to get a vaccine,” Iwata stresses.



## Are the numbers in the right places?

The total cost of the Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games has been raised by 294 billion yen (\$2.8 billion) to 1.64 trillion yen (\$15.8 billion), announced the Tōkyō Games organizing committee on its fifth budget release.

The 294 billion yen increase is mostly for the setup of venues and maintenance of the athletes village, including the installation of countermeasures to prevent the Games from becoming a super-spreader event. Part of it is directed towards the opening and closing ceremonies, as labor costs and the added expense of storage for the completed structures increases.

As the numbers for the Summer Games rise, so does the number for everything else. The restaurants and bars that have been following municipal requests to cut business hours short will be able to tap in a 741.8 billion yen (\$7.15 billion) reserve fund for subsidies of up to 60,000 yen per day.

On Jan. 28, the Japanese parliament authorized a third extra budget for fiscal 2020 totaling 19.18 trillion yen (\$185 billion).

Among the third increase is a 1.03 trillion yen (\$9.79 billion) for the extension of the controversial travel subsidy program, the “GoTo Campaign,” to late June.

But what’s missing from these budget hikes and



talks are the support for people who now rely on the welfare system due to layoffs and severe income drops.

During the House of Councilors Budget Committee session on Jan. 27, Michihiro Ishibashi, of the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP), asked PM Suga, “Are you telling people in dire economic straits (due to the pandemic) to just help themselves?”

“First of all, (people) should try whatever they can on their own. If that does not work at all, then the government will step in to help with the social safety net,” Suga replied. “There are various measures in place and, in the end, the government has the welfare system.”

Ayako Oguni, a writer for The Mainichi, reports that the welfare system should be the first step toward self-reliance, but only 20 percent of those who are eligible receive it. There are continuing efforts on the municipal and the prefectural level which aims to hinder the whole process.

What should be the “first step toward self-reliance” has become “the final safety net,” Oguni writes.

Tomoshi Okuda, president of the nonprofit organization Hoboku, emphasizes, “There should not be hierarchy or order among self-support, mutual support, or public support. Public support should not come in last.”

According to a study published in Nature, researchers at Hong Kong University and Tōkyō Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology reported that suicide rates rose 16 percent during the second wave of COVID-19.

Notably, among women and children, rates spiked 37 percent and 49 percent, respectively. The prolonged pandemic increased the burden on working mothers, while domestic violence increased, the study found.

The study reports a correlation between the children suicide rate and the period after the nationwide school closure.

## What's the play?

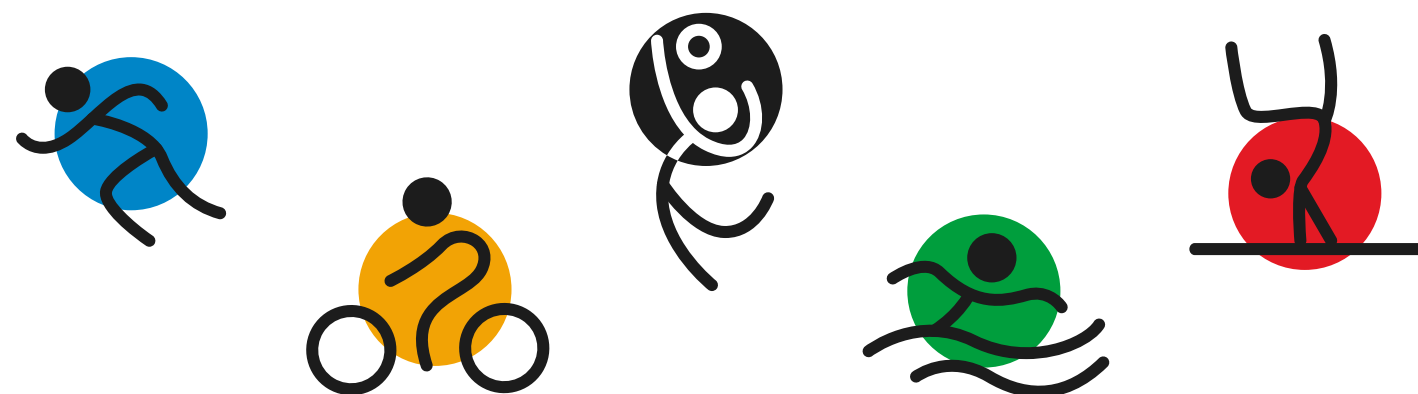
Scandal after scandal are breaking out about senior bureaucrats **dining out lavishly** in Ginza with Suga's eldest son or ruling lawmakers **visiting hostess bars**.

As the confidence in officials decreases, suicide rates surge, and the job market shrinks, the Japanese public is quickly growing weary and progressively questioning whether PM Suga and his cabinet have the best interest of the Japanese people in mind.

Perhaps Tōkyō doesn't want the glory of declaring “victory over COVID-19” falling into the laps of Beijing as the 2022 Winter Olympic Games nears.

Perhaps the Japanese government simply doesn't want to lose face.

Whatever the final dance that Suga and Bach have imagined it to be, one thing is certain. Borrowing from the article title in The Sydney Morning Herald, “Tōkyō Olympics plan is tempting disaster.”



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## Photos

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Yuebo (Joby) Zhang is a second-year ALT from America living in Tōkyō. His favorite spots are the small shops found in the back alleys from the likes of Nakameguro, Omotesandō, and Ebisu. Since graduating from university and working at his parents' restaurant for two years, he's delighted to be living in such a foodie metropolis.



Cross-country skiing is a wonderful thing. You experience the beautiful natural scenery in the winter, with sweeping views of snow-covered mountains, and if you're lucky, wildlife. All the while gliding along the top of the snow, your skis rhythmically crunching down as you breathe in the clean crisp air. Moving fluidly in the outdoors and taking in the scenery isn't only a full-body workout, it's therapeutic. Cross-country ski courses allow you to view the world in another way. They can take you around a small flat 1-kilometer oval track, parks, golf courses, woods, along rivers or over mountains.

## My Journey

Being a huge running fanatic, I had quickly discovered the website **Runnet** after arriving

in Japan, an invaluable resource for road and trail running races across Japan which also allows for easy race registration. I wondered how to fill the running void when my first winter in Hokkaidō came around. Starting around late November or December, I found ski races were listed on Runnet.

I had dabbled a bit in cross-country skiing in my childhood, which mostly entailed short ambles through the woods or around my parents' yard. Upon seeing the opportunity to register for ski races on Runnet, I thought, "Wow, I can ski on flat ground for long distances? I need to check this out!"

## Starting Out

I connected with a **Nordic ski club** in Sapporo, a group which provides invaluable information about starting out with cross-country skiing,

such as tips about gear, cross-country ski courses, and recommended races. I enrolled in a few skate-style cross-country ski lessons for about ¥3,000 each, held by a club member in (simple) English. I got skate-style cross-country skis at the Hard-off in Makomanai, Sapporo, and ski boots at Nissen in Sapporo.

I skied on the weekends and some weeknights at the Tomisawa ski course in Asahikawa, a challenging course, groomed, with plenty of high-quality snow. There is a flat 1-kilometer loop for beginners, with a small hill nearby to practice inclines and descents, while the rest of the course is intermediate/advanced and requires skills to navigate the inclines and descents smoothly and safely. Alpine skiing experience helps with confidence on the descents.

## My First Races

My first ski race was on February 23rd in Bibai, on a golf course, organized a lot like running races. You register ahead of time, get a bib on race day, and there is a groomed wide course prepared for you with arrows and volunteers pointing the way. We started in our own lanes, with parallel tracks to push forward for the first 50 meters of the race so we're not stepping on each other's skis. I didn't rush and focused on using the correct technique as much as possible. The wind blew, helping me along on one side, and pushing against me relentlessly on the other.

Despite it snowing heavily, the course was still easily skiable thanks to a man on a snowmobile



# The Wind Beneath My Skis

## My Journey With Cross-Country Skiing And How You Can Start Too



grooming the course ahead of the racers. The staff did their best to make me feel welcome, they all knew my name and cheered me on as I glided through the finish line. Though I was the last finisher, I was the first and only participant in my age group. I received a 1st place award, a spicy flavorful miso paste. I skied the 10-kilometer race in Takasu the following weekend and was once again the only one in my age group. Takasu offered great awards to the 1st place finishers: a bag of rice and a 24-pack of bottled tea.

Completing those races had boosted my confidence to try a longer distance, the 30-kilometer ski marathon in Rankoshi. The course boasts stunning scenery, winding through the Chisenupuri ski area. Since it was mid-April, snow was still on the ground but the temperature was warm, thus the course was a slush-fest, making it difficult to glide. Cross-country ski fanatics turned out nonetheless. After all, the race loot included a drawstring canvas bag.

## Vasaloppet

The Vasaloppet ski race in Asahikawa was the big race of the season. The original Vassaloppet cross-country ski race is in Sweden, and races under the same name are held around the world. The most talented cross-country skiers in Japan turn out for this event. Ski rental is possible: you sign up and pay for it if needed when registering for the race.

My first time skiing this race was in 2018, the first weekend in March, and I skied the entire 15-kilometer distance. I was already familiar with the course and its challenging climbs and descents. My students had signed for the classic style race, the day after mine. The following year, 2019, I participated in the 30-kilometer race, two laps around a 15-kilometer course. Men participate in the 45-kilometer race, while women are limited to the 30-kilometer.

The excuse for this (in my opinion, sexism) was the strict time cutoff. Eniwa has the same situation, claiming that no women have been interested in the longest distance, so they stopped offering it to them. Some trail running races in Japan have very strict time cutoffs, but they let women participate, even if they are pulled out later on the course due to time cutoffs. The Yūbetsu 80-kilometer ski race allowed me to ski, and I wrote about it [here](#).

At the start of the 2019 Vasaloppet 30-kilometer race, a group of older women were waiting and ready to go. They remarked that I seemed fast. I joked “Oh, no, I’m the number one slowest!” and they bantered with me, laughing, “No, no, I’m the number one slowest!”

Photo: *Finishing The Race, Sheila Mulherin*

We started on our own ski tracks, pushing straight ahead 50 meters before stepping out of our tracks to ski freely. The course curves, climbs and descends steeply. Thin long light cross-country skis prove harder to control on steep descents than alpine skis and require practice and confidence. This race is not for the fainthearted.

A man dressed in all green spandex zoomed by, lapping me twice during this race. As I neared a steep descent, an elderly man lost control and collided with me. We both were fine, thankfully. At the bottom of the same hill, a different (not

elderly) man was sitting on the edge of the course and waiting for the Emergency Medical Technicians on snowmobiles. He had lost control at the sharp curve at the bottom.

Aid stations staffed by outgoing chatty volunteers along the way provided water, hot tea, sports drinks, small snacks, and chocolates. I appreciated them every time. I always bring a waist pack with hot tea and a little snack, just in case. Feeling good, I glided through the start/finish area to start my second lap, with new obstacles: children!



The shorter races had started around the same time I was passing through for my second lap. Children of all abilities zoomed around me; their speed and energy inspired me. Some were falling as well, and stepping on my skis, which proved a test of my agility.

After about 4-5 kilometers, the children had taken their respective turn offs to the finish line. The crowd thinned out and silence fell around me. I glided along easily, taking in deep breaths of fresh air and admiring the scenery. I took on the steep descents more confidently, with no one around to collide with. The clear weather held and I finished to a small group of enthusiastic spectators and volunteers cheering.

Lo and behold, I was correct when bantering with the other women at the starting line. I was the “number one slowest” 30-kilometer finisher. A few 45-kilometer finishers came in after me. That’s fine, I was out there for the experience and had enjoyed every minute. After the race, I popped off my skis and helped myself to post-race vegan-friendly food and drinks provided by the race organizers: a few onigiri, fruit, hot tea and a hot Swedish blueberry drink called Blåbärssoppa. I chatted with members of the Sapporo ski club, and a few Swedish skiers who’d come from Tōkyō two years in a row. We parted ways with a “See you next year!”

Sadly, we know how 2020 turned out, and how 2021 will turn out: Vasaloppet cancelled, two years in a row. On the positive side, most cross-country ski courses are being groomed this 2020-2021 season, with much higher quality snow this year than last!

For me, no finisher’s towel or bling is necessary. I will continue to cross-country ski for enjoyment. Let’s look forward to competing in more races in the winter of 2021-2022!



## How To Get Started:

First, check if there is a cross-country ski course in your locale or vacation destination. If your locale gets snow in the winter, there’s a high probability that a cross-country ski course is not far.

There are two styles of cross-country skiing: classic-style, and skate-style. Whichever style you choose will dictate what kind of ski boots and skis you buy, and what kind of course you ski on. A few ski lessons are recommended for either ski style. The technique doesn’t come naturally!

**Classic-style** skiing refers to skis with grip wax. It is similar to moving in a Nordic track exercise machine, with your poles moving opposite your legs, similar to walking. Classic-style cross-country ski courses are more ubiquitous. Classic-style ski tracks are usually carved out on the side of groomed skate-style cross-country ski courses. There are no citizen level classical races in Japan only elite races, but they are very popular in Europe, eg the Vasaloppet.

**Aruku-style** is referred to as cross-country touring skis in English. These skis typically have fish scales on the base. Aruku ski races in Japan are definitely not classical races as you can do them on skate skis. The name just denotes that the races are not as serious and often won’t be awarded."

**Skate-style** involves moving in a similar way to rollerblading or skating, with both

Photo: *Cross-country Ski Trail*, David Haile

poles pushing off at the same time. You move faster in skate-style skiing, and it’s good cross-training for runners who are going through a knee injury (happened to me) and need to move their body in a different way. In Japanese it’s called “Free-style” or “Kurokan.” Skate-style ski courses require grooming.

Every ski course in Hokkaidō is free to use. Except for Asahidake, which is ¥500 unless you’re staying at a nearby hotel. The hotel gives you a bib, or if you can pay for admission at the visitors center.

Many town halls in Hokkaidō will lend you classic style cross-country skis, boots and poles free of charge! If your town snows amply every winter, there will probably be a program for this. Inquire your local town hall staff about cross-country skiing. The sports and/or recreation department will point you in the right direction, and possibly also have a schedule of group lessons available, most likely all in Japanese.

If you want to buy your own gear, starting out may be a little expensive. Get boots, skis, poles, windproof breathable clothes, a hat, gloves or mittens and a visor or sports sunglasses. Checking out second-hand shops is the cheapest route. Other shops for everything cross-country ski-related (in Hokkaidō) are Nissen and Sapporo Skid in Sapporo. Nissen also hosts pop-up events in smaller cities in Hokkaidō.

## Groomed skate-style cross-country ski courses in Hokkaidō include (but are not limited to):

- Takino Suzuran Park, Sapporo
- Shirahatayama Stadium, Sapporo
- Moerenuma Park, Sapporo
- Makomanai Country Club, Sapporo
- Otaki Sports Park, Date-shi
- Tomisawa Elementary School, Asahikawa
- Asahidake Visitors Center, Asahikawa
- Shirogane Onsen, Biei
- Sun Pillar Park, Nayoro.
- Chiseneshi Cross-country Ski Field, Ootineppu
- Asahi Ski grounds, Shibetsu-shi (closed 2020-2021 season)
- Kunneppu Recreational Park
- Moiwa Sports World, Kitami
- Okhotsk Park, Abashiri
- Kashiwagaoka Park, Bihoro



## A Note On Safety:

In cross-country skiing, both styles are generally quite safe.

Acute injuries are rare compared to alpine skiing due to the slower speed, and the unattached heel in the binding allows for less ankle injuries. Chronic injuries due to overuse do occur, as in any endurance sport. Be mindful, try to use correct technique and posture, and listen to your body. With skate-style skiing, always pushing off from the same foot may result in irritation or an injury on the outer tendon of the ankle. Regularly switching which side you push off from will prevent this.

Staying on a groomed course or staying where the elevation change isn't so extreme and avalanches aren't a threat are the two safest ways to cross-country ski.

Backcountry skiing is another style of skiing, in which skiers venture into the alpine mountains and chart their own course, rather than staying on groomed courses or in small parks with little elevation change. Also called off-piste, alpine touring, or out-of-area skiing, it provides a chance to get up-close and personal with the wild winter mountains. Backcountry skis and boots are heavier and sturdier to maneuver in the deep powder snow.

Backcountry skiing is risky though, because avalanches are a real threat in backcountry terrain. Avalanche Safety Training (AST) courses are available in Hakuba and Niseko. Other countries' avalanche safety certification courses may have a different label, but they all teach generally the same information: snow, weather conditions, and geographical features which facilitate an avalanche, the

equipment used in a companion rescue, and how to rescue a companion who's been buried in an avalanche. This course provided a valuable skill for me, has clearly shown me the risks involved, and effectively (for now anyways) scared me away from backcountry skiing.

If you want to experience backcountry skiing, I recommend participating in the AST 1 training course. Going with a qualified guide and with other skiers who have participated in the AST 1 course is the safest way. Every year, at least a few people in Japan lose their lives in the winter mountains. Respect the mountains!

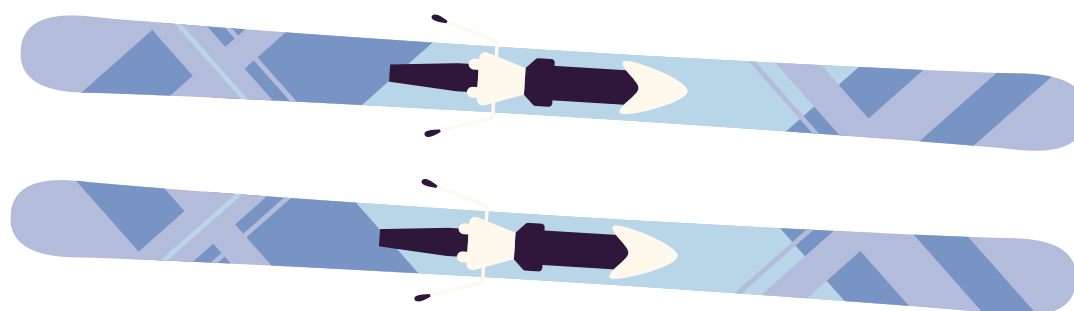
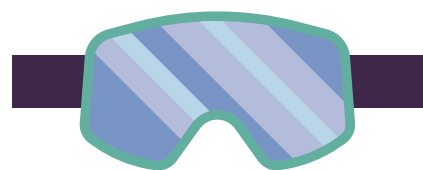
## Considering the Coronavirus:

Outdoor sports are safe against the coronavirus due to limited exposure to other people. Changing areas and bathrooms at cross-country ski courses may be closed or partitioned with clear plastic vinyl. Showers

may be closed, so nearby onsens are an option. Onsens make an effort to stay safer by checking your temperature, putting alcohol pump sprays at the entrance, and promoting social distancing by spacing out lockers and restricting capacity.

## In Conclusion:

It's never too late to try a new activity! No matter your athletic (or unathletic) ability, it's possible to improve steadily and feel gratification from it. Make mistakes, fall down, laugh about it, and keep plugging away. You don't need fancy gear. Lined wind pants, sweat-wicking or wool layers, a thin down jacket, and your usual hat and mittens are fine for starting out. Cross-country skiing is a rewarding activity, benefiting your physical and mental health. Enjoy what all four seasons have to offer! Appreciate the winter while it lasts. See you out there!



*Sheila is an English teacher in Hokkaidō. 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 always looks forward to the Hokkaidō winters when she can cross-country ski.*



# COMMUNITY AND TRAVEL

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**Clarissa Combe**  
*"We are fighting between a rock and why bother."  
— Worriers, "They/Them/Theirs"*

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**COMMUNITY AND TRAVEL DESIGNER**

**Nate Ryman**







Patrick Loyer (Shizuoka)

It's been a hard year for everyone. Being in another country adds another dimension to it, and normally, our escape is in the form of traveling. I finished JET in 2015 and have since been working in the travel industry in Japan and with [Discova](#) at their Tōkyō office since December 2019. I am currently the Sales Manager and in charge of the tailor-made holidays team for travel in Japan. Pre-COVID, things were doing amazingly well. Travelers to Japan were up 30 percent every year, more and more sights had English, hotels were getting renovated after years of neglect since the Japanese economic bubble burst . . . and then the world changed. Our own business used to rely 95% on international travelers, and this business just suddenly disappeared as borders closed. We went from doing interviews and hiring to having to reduce our staff numbers within a month. Most people I know within the industry in Japan are in the same scenario, and companies have had to drastically reduce costs and change their model. Some do online tours or seminars, others drastically changed what they did previously, and some inevitably have gone under.

Over the years, I've gotten to know people and created relationships with some partners in the industry. It has been hard to go from expecting record sales to having to cancel everything we did. We know some of the big industry players will weather the crisis since they have government backing, but smaller companies are not the same. Small companies rely on other small local businesses to try and offer something unique, to create their place in a market dominated by people booking via the big retail offices and internet services. Unfortunately, there are quite a few of our partners that we have not heard from in months. Maybe they are temporarily closed, maybe permanently.



Meet a Geisha in Izu Peninsula

## Good Changes are Happening

One thing that we are currently seeing is companies talking more together. Small companies who used to do their own thing are trying to figure out what's going on and getting hints from others in the business. Some associations are being formed, so the small companies have a bigger voice to raise concerns to the Japan Tourism Agency to tackle some issues. Now there is more of a culture of sharing information starting.

We are also seeing a lot of local governments getting support in the form of grants from the government, and these are used for tourism promotion, which was often aimed at overseas consumers until now. There are also more webinars to virtually discover less-visited prefectures than ever. Everyone is trying to adapt, which is saying a lot in an industry that has been conservative for so long. Some *ryokans* have even stopped using faxes since their reservation team is not going to the office anymore!

Another very interesting change has happened. It is a bit of a forced one, but there is a much bigger emphasis on health and safety checks. Japan already had some good regulations for the hospitality industry, but things have stepped up. If you've gotten out of your house in the last six-plus months, you've undoubtedly seen the disinfectants and masks everywhere. Travel agencies like where I work are also increasing all that. We now have a very strict process of clarifications and documents that need to be filled out by all our partners (guides, hotels, private transfers, etc.) and then approved by our office for us to continue working with them. This removes some of the flexibility of what we can do, of course, but also means the services we provide will be safer. The way we see this, it is the only way we can protect our clients and also our jobs in the long term.

## What Happens Going Forward?

That's the million-dollar question. We're preparing to have people travel as safely as possible, but facing uncertainty. All my colleagues and I have been working remotely since last April. Since there is no revenue, we are all on a reduced workweek, as is everyone else I've talked to in other similar companies. While we would prefer to simply wait for things to return to normal, we're increasingly thinking there will not be a new normal any time soon. Since January, we have started to reach out to some of our partners, discuss with others in the market, and see what's already out there. We are also taking what we were already doing for international travelers and applying it to domestic travel. It may sound like an easy change, but there are huge differences, from the contracts with accommodations to selling channels and the different needs of people living in Japan compared with those coming from overseas. Someone who comes to Japan for their once-in-a-lifetime trip will not have the same expectations as someone who's been here for months or years.



Visit a Sake Brewery





Still, travel needs to restart somehow. The Go To Campaign was supposed to achieve this, but it was put together awkwardly. Information was hard to get, and mostly, it's the big Japanese companies who got the bigger piece of the pie. As a foreign-owned company, we learned about the process of Go To after it went live, and by the time we went through the approval process and got approved, the market was already saturated with "Go To" offers everywhere. Some local hotels and partners did get some business, but not the ones who relied mostly on international visitors, and many said it was still less than what they were doing previously—basically just a crutch to help them survive temporarily.

As well as our health and safety checks, we're trying to cooperate with the partners we like to see how we can come up with new offers together. We're constantly sharing ideas internally and are more open than ever to some new suggestions. Everyone on my team, myself included, has taken on many different tasks and learned things which were never in our standard job description. I guess being a JET helped with that. Being an ALT, we get used to things changing at the last minute; like a JTE telling you they changed the schedule and forgot to inform you that you have a class in five minutes. It's been a learning process.



*Buffalo ride in  
Taketomi, Okinawa*

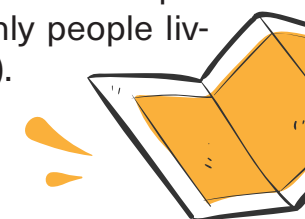


*Hiking the Nakasendo*

## The Big Conundrum

The situation we're facing is this: we do want and need to make money to keep our business and retain our staff, but at the same time, we don't want to be insensitive and tell people it's OK to travel. Is there a perfect solution? None that we've found, to be honest. In the meantime, we continue looking at what we can offer locals and slowly getting the word out about what we can do and how safe we can do it. We've created a dedicated Facebook page for people living locally to see examples of what we can do, we're discussing with partners to find new offers out of the big cities or the crowded and touristy areas, and we're making sure everything will be the safest it can be. If people want to plan their trip in two weeks or six months, we are more than happy to answer any kind of inquiries, by email, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc. We won't be able to do everything, but what we'll offer will be created according to our comprehensive health and safety guidelines.

If you want to inquire about travel, feel free to get in touch with us at [Japan@discova.com](mailto:Japan@discova.com) and check out our [Facebook page](#) for local travelers for some ideas—all the pictures in this article are activities or places we can send people. We are adding new ones regularly on Facebook to give people more ideas and let them know when we have some special discounts (please note only people living in Japan will see the offers).



*Patrick Loyer was an ALT for 5 years (2010-2011 Hokkaidō, 2011-2015 Shizuoka). He now works as Sales Manager for the Japan office of the travel company, Discova. He misses playing taiko and going to festivals a lot, but tries to use his free time to teach French to his son or catch up on online gaming.*



## Travel, Food, Culture and Lifestyle

### About

Travel being our PASSION, my partner and I have been taking baby steps in this nomadic world, exploring places around Japan and coming by some beautiful experiences that we wish to share via Two Winged Spoons, our travelogue. However, travel isn't our sole purpose.

Two Winged Spoons is about love, seeing the world through different lenses, devouring scrumptious cuisines, and living a happy life. We both believe in chasing happiness and shunning the negativity and clutter of modern life. Life isn't perfect for anyone, but having an optimistic attitude towards it just gives us so much time and energy to do the things we love.

We work very hard at our professional jobs to earn and save the money we choose to spend on travel. For the past year, we have spent large portions of our earnings on traveling while holding full-time corporate jobs. The only reason to put it out here is—"If we can do it, so can you!" People like to invest in big houses, cars, etc., but our priority at the moment is to travel and gain new experiences in life, learn about new cultures, make sure to design our life our way, and appreciate every moment of it because after all, it's ONE LIFE—make it count!

### So what's in the bag?

Now that we have just stepped in the biz, we are aware that there is a lot of work to do.

To kickstart, we intend to share blogs about the places we have visited, tips on planning itineraries, guide books, scenic landscapes, and certainly some bumper experiences because, hey! No one usually wishes to talk about them, and life can't always be perfect!

To give the gist, here's a sneak peek of one of the best vacations we have had to date.

### Niijima Island

*That perfect getaway from Tōkyō*

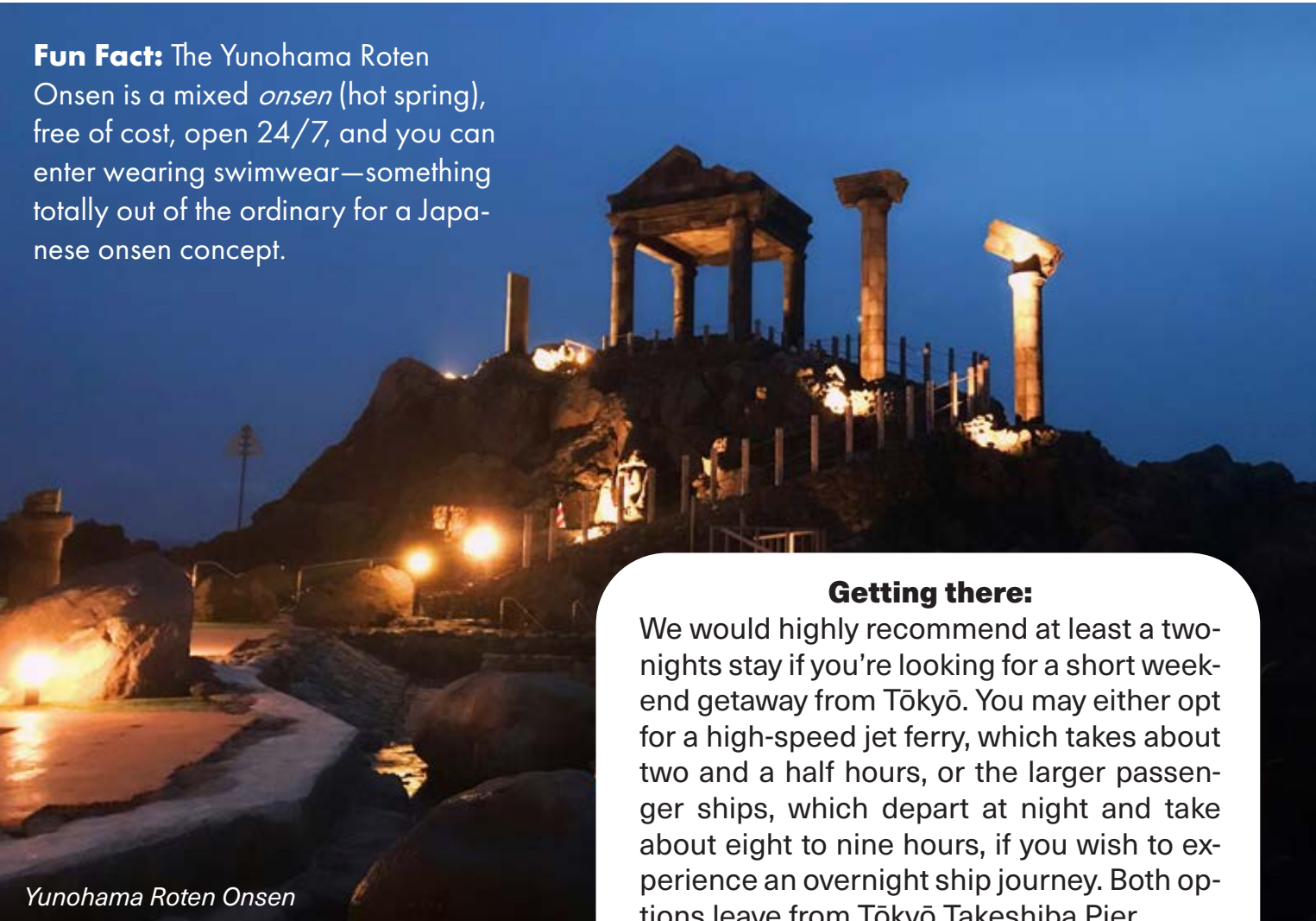
It isn't every day that you get to wake up to the sea, especially if you are living in a bustling city like Tōkyō. Also, every once in a while, you need that break from your monotonous corporate life.

There might be plenty of beach locations covering this island country, but Niijima is different. You'll find none of the luxuries of life on this off-beat island (not even a convenience store), and that's exactly what makes this place special.

Long sandy beaches, towering white cliffs, and plenty of waves make Niijima a popular holiday spot and major surf destination. And it doesn't stop here. Another reason Niijima is famous is its *moai* statues, which are dotted all over the island. Swim, surf, sunbathe, take a dip in a hot spring, or just ride a bicycle around (as the island is very small)—it has a great variety of options.



**Fun Fact:** The Yunohama Roten Onsen is a mixed *onsen* (hot spring), free of cost, open 24/7, and you can enter wearing swimwear—something totally out of the ordinary for a Japanese onsen concept.



Yunohama Roten Onsen

#### Getting there:

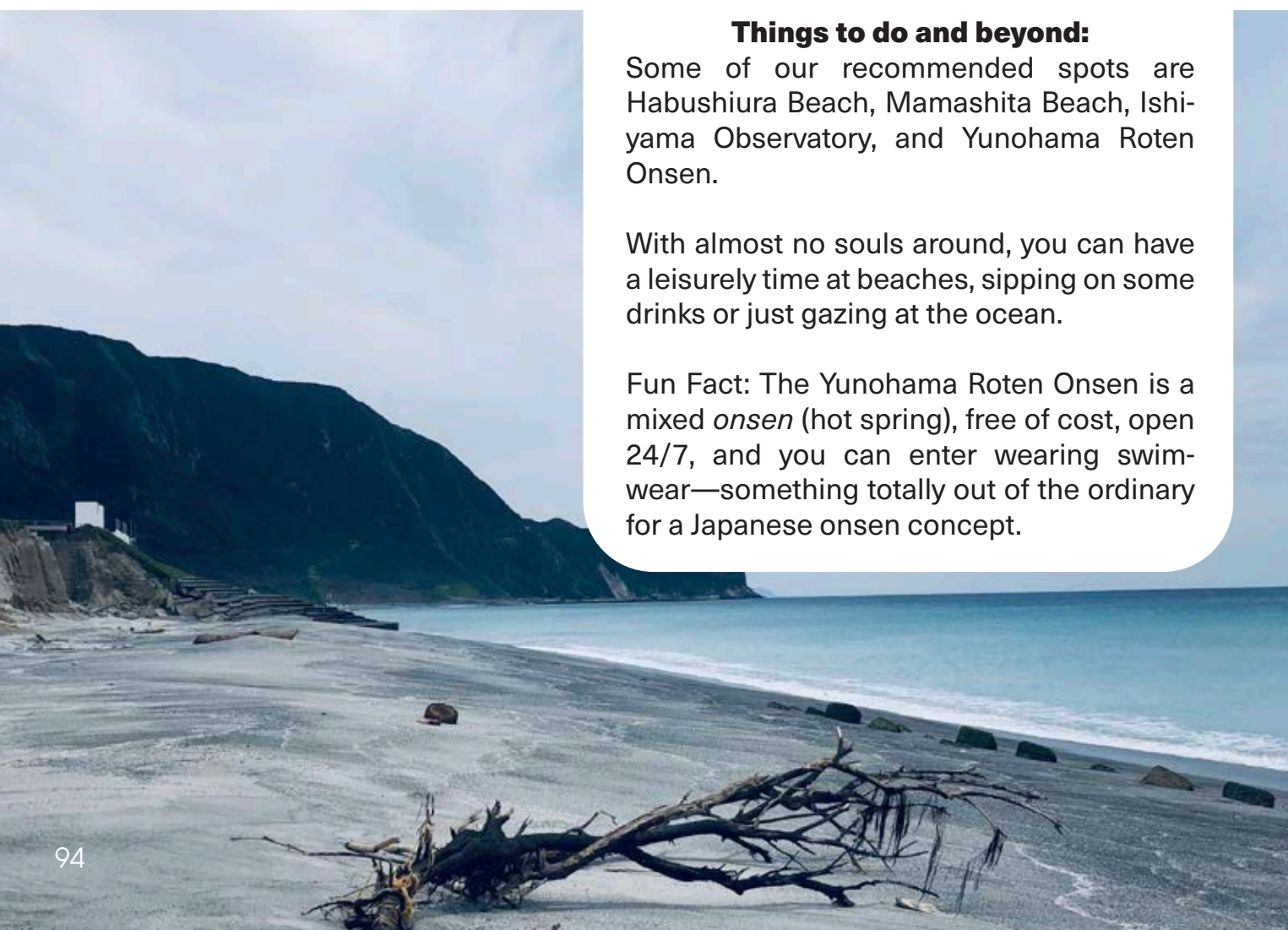
We would highly recommend at least a two-nights stay if you're looking for a short weekend getaway from Tōkyō. You may either opt for a high-speed jet ferry, which takes about two and a half hours, or the larger passenger ships, which depart at night and take about eight to nine hours, if you wish to experience an overnight ship journey. Both options leave from Tōkyō Takeshiba Pier.

#### Things to do and beyond:

Some of our recommended spots are Habushiura Beach, Mamashita Beach, Ishiyama Observatory, and Yunohama Roten Onsen.

With almost no souls around, you can have a leisurely time at beaches, sipping on some drinks or just gazing at the ocean.

Fun Fact: The Yunohama Roten Onsen is a mixed *onsen* (hot spring), free of cost, open 24/7, and you can enter wearing swimwear—something totally out of the ordinary for a Japanese onsen concept.



#### Choosing a roof over your head:

Being a tiny island and sparsely populated, Niiijima doesn't offer any luxurious hotels. However, you can choose a nice hotel with an onsen or a simple guesthouse based on your preference.

#### Dining at Niiijima:

FISH obviously must be on your menu here. We would definitely suggest a restaurant called "Sakae Sushi" if you are a sushi lover. One fish variety that we strongly recommend is *kinmedai* for a succulent fish experience.

We will soon be writing about plenty of such experiences and information, so do keep an eye on our website and follow us on our Instagram account.



*Ani and Keto met in Japan during the year of the pandemic. Apart from battling their 9-5 corporate jobs, they share a common passion for traveling, and that's what brought them together. Ever since they have been exploring various places around the country. They have now started Two Winged Spoons, their blog on Instagram with the handle [@twowingedspoons](#) and also a [website](#). With this, their purpose is to share the experiences they come across on this journey and show that life is beautiful.*





*Mack Kellis (Yamaguchi)*

On the third Sunday in February, one of the coldest areas in all of Yamaguchi suddenly becomes the hottest place in the prefecture. Once a year, the lush fields of the emerald green Akiyoshidai Karst Plateau are set aflame as part of a ceremonial burning that dates back over 600 years. In the past, the burning of the fields was simply done for agricultural purposes. During the ancient times, farmers used the plateau as a place to grow their crops. The fields were burned to promote soil health and a bountiful harvest for the next year. It is said that this field burning is the largest in all of Japan.

On the day of the burning, locals and tourists gather around the viewing platform in the heart of Akiyoshidai. The morning air is still tinged with the chill of winter as people mull about. Even the once-green fields have now taken on their sandy brown winter coats. Usually winter isn't the best time to visit the plateau, but the day

## Akiyoshidai Burns

the burning takes place is a rare day. Inside a nearby cafe, people sip hot coffees and enjoy the warmth. The cafe also offers a nice view of the plateau, along with some fossils and other relics that have been reclaimed from the many pitfalls that dot the fields of Akiyoshidai.

Others outside the cafe vie for the best spot to stand and watch the spectacle while elementary school students in green *happi* coats set up their taiko drums. A few kilometers away, local volunteers stand at the ready with their fire starters. Trails have been cut out of the tall grass to help guide the flames. These snake around the viewing area and main road. After a few words from town leaders and organizers, the students begin their performance. Following a deep shout, the students start pounding on their drums. The students at the front hammer away at a large piece of bamboo, letting out a loud cracking sound. The students' movements emulate the flowing green of the plateau's



grass in the wind. As the boom of the drums starts to reach a crescendo, a sleight of hand reveals red ribbons tied to each of the students' drumsticks. The swinging motions create an illusion of crimson flames streaking across the green coats. Slowly, the crisp aroma of burnt dry grass begins to waft across the valley and up to the viewing platform. Dark puffs of grey brown haze lazily rise from the distant hills.

As the performance finishes, fire starters move into the patches of grass nearest the viewing area and slowly start to light it up. The dry winter air has kept the grass parched, meaning even the smallest sparks will cause combustion. Onlookers watch and gather around the nearest fire starter, getting as close to the action as the barrier ropes will allow. After several minutes, the flames from across the valley have made their way to the hills by the viewing area. The bright red and orange conflagration roars down the hills toward the viewers. From afar, it appears as though the hills are being dyed in black ink as the dark color of the burned grass seeps into the sandy brown scenery. Back at the viewing area, the grass has become a massive bonfire. With the flames leaping up several meters, firefighters start to usher onlookers back farther toward the central platform. Even so, people get close enough to the fire to singe hairs and draw sweat. Black smoke covers the clouds, turning dawn into an instant dusk. Black and grey ash fall from the sky, mirroring the snow that fell just weeks before.

**“people get close enough to the fire to singe hairs and draw sweat”**



After an hour or two, the crowds start to disperse and return to their vehicles. Only those who want to see the burn reach completion stay. At this point there isn't much left of the former scenery. Even once the burn has finished, the ash continually falls, lightly blanketing homes from Mine all the way to Yamaguchi City. If given the chance, the Akiyoshidai burning is well worth the time. The experience is very unique in its sense of danger and dark excitement. Those planning to attend the event should take note that the event can be cancelled at a moment's notice for inclement weather or other happenings in the plateau.



*Mack Kellas is a direct hire ALT who has been living and working in Mine City, Yamaguchi Prefecture for the last five and a half years. He enjoys making pour-over coffee and collecting sneakers. Most of his days off are spent playing video games and hanging out with his wife.*



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Contact the Head Editor of *CONNECT*, Alice Ridley, at [connect.editor@ajet.net](mailto:connect.editor@ajet.net) with your submissions, comments, and questions.

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