



24 | A Tokyo Game Show for 2021

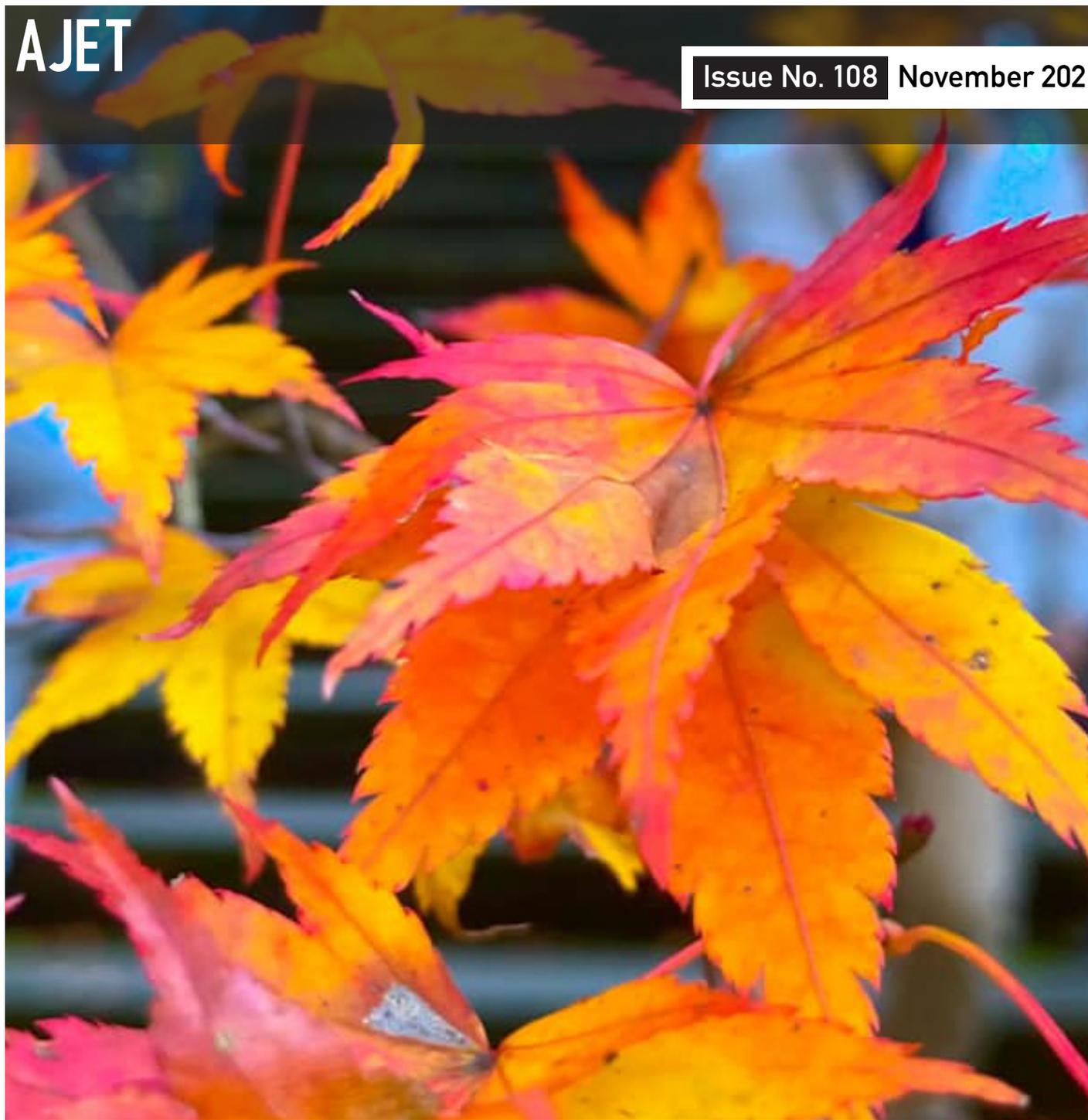
44 | Do You Know Noh?

80 | Volunteering at the Paralympics During COVID-19

126 | A Seiji Summary: A Recap of LDP Elections

AJET

Issue No. 108 November 2021



Arts & Culture, Lifestyle, Language, Travel & Community

CONNECT



LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Greetings, gentle readers, and welcome to the November issue of **CONNECT!**

Personally, my fifth autumn in Japan has gotten off to a great start—full of Halloween lessons, gorgeous leaves, pumpkin carving, fall festivals (how I've missed you!), and of course, fabulous new articles from the hard-working team at **CONNECT!** I hope your autumn has been just as lovely and that you enjoy reading the November issue as much as I have. Here are a few highlights to get you started:

Entertainment's [A Tokyo Game Show for 2021](#) brings us the biggest news from the largest video game expo in Japan. Check out the highlights of the year's most anticipated games, new technologies, and innovative indies, as well as an inside look at the virtual reality format of TGS itself.

If politics is more your jam (or you would just like to know what's going on for once), the Community section's [A Seiji Summary](#) gives an insightful look at the recent Japanese elections and new Prime Minister Kishida.

The Culture section's [Do You Know Noh?](#) (in addition to having a wonderfully punny title) is a fascinating window into the history of noh theater on Sado Island—the place of exile for political dissidents in early Japan. As a big fan of traditional Japanese theater, I loved reading this article and I hope many of you will find it interesting too.

Over in Sports, [Volunteering at the Paralympics During COVID-19](#) takes us inside the opening ceremony of the Paralympics with a volunteer right in the center of the controversial 2021 games. This personal narrative is a quick read and gave me a greater appreciation for paralympic athletes.

Finally, in Travel's [National Momijigari](#) expats from all over Japan share their favorite spots to enjoy fall foliage and when to visit. Hopefully this article reveals some hidden gems in your prefecture, or helps you plan your travels this fall so you can enjoy the splendid colors of the season.

These and many other wonderful articles await you in the November issue of **CONNECT!** Happy reading!
Cheers,

Rachel Spain Fagundes

Head Editor

P.S

If you have an interesting story you'd like to contribute, please get in touch! You can send article pitches directly to me at connect.editor@ajet.net, or join [CONNECT Magazine Contributor's Circle](#) on Facebook to get updates from our editors when they're on the hunt for a story!

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"Likkle bud cyaa seed far" (Little birds take seeds very far.) Meaning: A small effort can make a big difference. — Unknown

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You can't wait for inspiration, you have to go after it with a club" — Jack London

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TABLE OF CONTENTS PHOTO

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ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

David Wirzba
Yilin Liu
Leo Okuyama
Fabian Albert
Renee Fisher
Leo Okuyama
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CONNECT | Art

- 8** Artist Spotlight: Kei Komatsubara
- 14** Yeux Nouveaux: Seeing with New Eyes after Kyotographie

CONNECT | Entertainment

- 24** A Tokyo Game Show for 2021
- 36** November Releases
- 38** November Reviews & Recommendations

CONNECT | Culture

- 44** Do You Know Noh?
 - 48** 88: My Journey Across Shikoku as an Accidental Pilgrim
-

CONNECT | Wellness

- 56** War on Maskne! 10 Tips to Clearer Skin
- 66** Fall Flavors: Parade of Persimmons
- 76** Covid Update
- 78** Mental Health Support

CONNECT | Sport

- 80** Volunteering at the Paralympics During COVID-19
-

CONNECT | Language

- 84** Teaching English and Other Life Lessons with Toshie Ogura
 - 91** Monthly Language Corner
-

CONNECT | Travel

- 94** In Search of Spirits: Exploring Haunted Niigata
- 100** National Momijigari: Local Color Palettes to Discover

CONNECT | Community

- 120** Bonfires and Boar at Hakusan's International Festival
- 126** A Seiji Summary: A Recap of LDP Elections

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"Art is a wound turned into light." — Georges Braque

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"I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound or stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading for?" — Franz Kafka

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"Likkle bud cyaa seed far" (Little birds take seeds very far.) Meaning: A small effort can make a big difference. — Unknown

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"Everyone should believe in something. I believe I will have another coffee." — Unknown

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"What I have learned through this madness is that you can absolutely solve your problems by throwing money at them. If you can't, you probably don't have enough money for that particular problem." — Xiran Jay Zhao, Iron Widow



ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

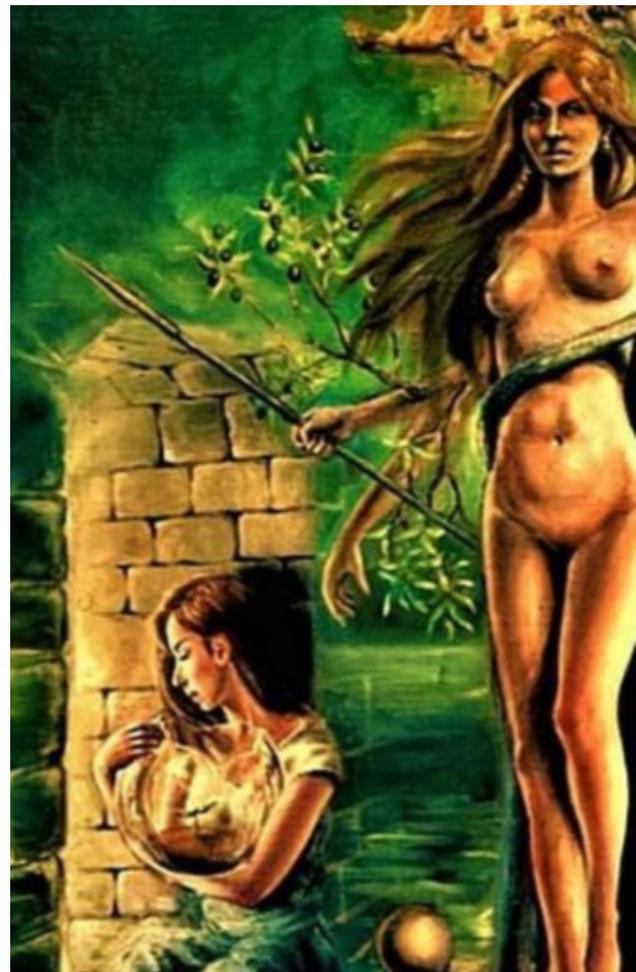
KEI KOMATSUBARA

Kei Komatsubara (Tokyo)
interviewed by Jessica Craven (Saitama)

J: WHERE ARE YOU FROM IN JAPAN, AND WHEN DID YOU START MAKING ART?

K: I was born in Nagoya in Aichi prefecture. But a few months later, my family moved to Tokyo. I started making art when I was 4 years old, and started going to drawing class in those days.

“SO, MY COMPOSITIONS LOOK LIKE A CODE OR RIDDLE. PEOPLE WHO LOOK AT MY ART WILL EXPERIENCE A SENSE OF CURIOSITY.”





J: COULD YOU PLEASE TELL US ABOUT THE ARTWORK THAT YOU MAKE?

K: I basically make drawings and sculptures. When I draw something, I decide the theme first. In order to decide, I investigate many books about history, philosophy, mythology and so on. Recently I have been using books of personal development as inspiration for my themes too. For my sculptures, the process is the same. My works are based on academic materials and contain some “messages” or “mysteries” from them.

I explore many kinds of messages—for example, the problems of human society, the relationships between people, my philosophical opinions, and numerous others. I like to embed complex meanings within my work that are difficult to understand because it is boring when people understand the meaning too quickly. So, my compositions look like a code or riddle. People who look at my art will experience a sense of curiosity.

On the other hand, I make work based on my interpretation of Roman art, which is more “sexual.” I think artwork should have a strong impact, whether it’s gross, beautiful, weird, terrible, erotic. . . . I chose an erotic style for my work because I like making human bodies. I think human bodies have lots of linear beauty and figurative art is the greatest art produced in the history of the universe itself. It has a strong impact both visually and conceptually. Sexuality is important for all lives and all people must be interested in it.

So, I cherish mysteries and sexual elements. I give some messages to people through my artwork . . . about world problems, ways of life, and emotions. It is essential to depict humans and human bodies to show these things. What is more, if the works need more impact and decorative embellishments, sexuality provides that. So I will use this style from now on.



J: DO YOU HAVE ANY INSPIRATION FOR YOUR WORK? WHAT IDEAS OR OTHER ARTISTS INSPIRE YOU?

K: Many places give me inspiration. Especially, I get inspiration from books or other works made by many people in museums. Or even from a general goods store.

My drawing works are based on the style of surrealism, so I am very interested in the style of Salvador Dalí, and he is the greatest artist, in my opinion. I am learning from great world artists like him, but mostly from those who draw weird compositions. Their works give me many ideas.

J: HOW DID YOU LEARN TO DRAW AND SCULPT?

K: I learned how to draw in a class when I was a small kid. However, the class was not for studying to go to art school, but just for people who like drawing. I went to the class once a week, and every time I drew a theme that had already been decided—like the design of fruits, a self-portrait, flowers, toys, landscapes . . . many different themes. But the class sometimes provided a “free drawing day” where everyone could draw what they wanted freely. I learned drawing very freely. But when I became a junior high school student, I began to play basketball, so I became more and more busy. Then, I quit going to that art class, but I kept studying drawing by myself.

I am a completely self-taught sculptor. Actually, I was interested in sculptures from a long time ago, but I didn't know how to do it. I bought books about sculptures and practiced many times. Also I went to museums many times and appreciated a lot of sculptures made by both amateurs and professionals alike.

J: COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT ANY EXHIBITIONS YOU HAVE TAKEN PART IN?

K: I joined a group exhibition of the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum about three times, and have also participated in some group exhibitions with my friends. The theme of the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum exhibitions were free, and every time I exhibited oil paintings. I have also participated in two other kinds of group exhibitions—exhibitions with Japanese people or international friends.



J: DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE INTERESTED IN LEARNING ABOUT SCULPTURE?

K: I have four main points of advice, especially for how to make human figures.

First, buy cheap clay and imitate the works made by other people or the shapes you want to make. I think when we make shapes, we first need to practice with our own hands. Gradually, you will get the skills of carving and the ability of spatial perception.

Second, look at people's faces and



WHEN YOU DO THIS, SOME PEOPLE WILL THINK YOU ARE CRAZY, BUT YOU NEED NOT CARE ABOUT IT. CRAZY ACTIONS ARE NECESSARY FOR PEOPLE WHO MAKE ART.

bodies in your everyday life. It takes a lot of time to learn the shape of the human figure. The outline of human bodies and the shape of parts like lips, eyes, ears, hands, and so on are so peculiar and unique. When you walk in the town, you can see a lot of people—make a habit to watch them carefully. Gradually, you can recognize many types of shapes of the human figure and its features. When you do this, some people will think you are crazy, but you need not care about it. Crazy actions are necessary for people who make art.

Third, draw a lot of nudes. It is not an exaggeration to say that the outline of human bodies are the most difficult forms to draw of all the things on the earth. If you study these most difficult forms, you can develop the greatest eyes which can catch the outline of many kinds of shapes. You should practice drawing both male and female nudes. Women's outlines are so smooth, so it is easy to learn about balanced proportions and the form of the basic human outline through studying them. Through drawing men, you can study the shape of muscles. The outline of men is really complex because it has many uneven types of muscle. It is easier to observe the shapes of muscles in men than in women. So you should go to figure drawing events a lot. If you can draw a human figure, you can draw almost any other shape.

ART CONTAINS MANY KINDS OF WEIRD THINGS FOR ORDINARY PEOPLE. BUT NEW VALUES CAN'T BE BORN WITHOUT WEIRD THOUGHTS AND ACTIONS.

Fourth, be brave. This is true not only for making sculptures, but for making any type of art. Art contains many kinds of weird things for ordinary people. But new values can't be born without weird thoughts and actions. I usually make sexual works, so some people think I am weird, but I cherish the people who like my art. It is okay. It is impossible to make work that everyone appreciates. There will be two types of people who see your art: those who like it and those who dislike it. That is all. So, you should be proud of your style.





Kei is an artist in Tokyo who creates many works and exhibits them in his free time. He especially focuses on figurative sculpture and drawing. He takes inspiration from many types of mythology, including Japanese, Chinese, Roman, and Greek mythology. He has participated in many exhibitions, including some international exhibitions along with JET Programme participants in Tokyo. You can see more of his art on his Instagram [@kei_komatsubara](https://www.instagram.com/kei_komatsubara).

Jessica is a fifth-year American JET living in Saitama. On weekends she enjoys hiking in remote areas of Saitama or taking day-trips to Tokyo. When not adventuring, she can be found reading or creating her own artwork, which can be seen on her Instagram [@jessica_craven_art](https://www.instagram.com/jessica_craven_art).



YEUX NOUVEAUX

seeing with new eyes after
Kyotographie

Daniel Mulcahy (Kyoto)

Not long ago, my girlfriend Tabia started learning French on Zoom. Once a week, I hear the sounds come through the door that bisects our apartment, familiar vowels sliding into place. It is wonderfully comforting. She has an artist's ear for the music of language and delights in the silliness of finding new voices.

This time last year, Tabia's father Mario was murdered, shot dead one night on a street in Fresno. California was far, the airlines closed or throttled with quarantine procedures. With no way home, she needed space to herself to grieve.

No small mercy, the tragedy coincided with *Kyotographie*—an international photography festival that annually spans the city with marvellous works of art. For a week and more, she walked from exhibition to exhibition, measuring her grief against the vagaries of experience she found there. At the end of those two weeks, she wrote her father's eulogy.

With her permission, I've included it below:

Hi Dad,

When I think of you, I think of an art gallery.

Various stories told by a single artist. You were so full of stories and words were your paintbrush. The world you painted was bright, colorful and full of compassion. The lighting of your work was mischievous and intelligent.

One instant, I am alone with my sorrow and my thoughts, surrounded by beautiful things. And suddenly, it is all but a beautiful memory.

When I was in the crest of my grief over your passing, I walked around Kyoto looking for some sense of the beautiful feeling of humanity. Fear, anger, chaos. It lingers in my heart like mold.

I tried to find light to ease my mind. To remind me of good. To remind me of fragility.

On my pilgrimage, I found an art gallery where the pieces are made for the visually impaired—in hand, a worn paper map to guide me into the unwritten blueprints of creativity.

I take a bus to a solitary, unassuming two-story building in the city. There is a bright red cloth sign settled into the ground waving at me, telling me I've arrived.

I walk in and have to go down this corridor. No lights. Just a rail to hold onto. At the end, I have to push a door open to this open-air gallery. Marble plaques with images etched into their surface are placed in the room on small tables. The assorted pieces have English and Japanese. And of course, Braille.

What a strange experience it is to be reminded of this gift of sight.

I close my eyes. Breathe into my new form. Try to recalibrate myself to use both hands. Palms. Fingers. Nails. I feel the lines and curves of sculptures that have no color but the texture of life.

I take my time, trying to reconstruct the face of a child and her friends playing under a tree on an autumn day. These moments, so tangible to someone else, but just a passing dream for me.

How strange a world we live in.

I continue my visit, letting the lull of this new experience hum in me like the breeze of a rotating fan on a hot summer day.

I walk up these steep stairs into a dimly lit and quiet place. With every creak of the floor, I am reminded of my weight in this world.

I am here when you are not. I feel the rainstorm in my heart try and spill out my eyes.

In the silence of the dark room, a piece struck me. Its title was

「ぶつかるの音、はしるの音」 (“Butsukaru no Oto, Hashiru no Oto,” “The Sound of Collision, the Sound of Running”)

There I stood, with my eyes closed in front of a plank of wood with nails and pins hammered into it. I didn't dare to look at the path of my hands, just wanted to dive into the feeling with sincerity. I think you would laugh at my seriousness.

I followed the smoothest path. The pearls guided my fingers across the board. There were forks and other paths on that singular line. And while my fingers visited them, I returned to the pearly course.

Then it stopped. Abrupt and unceremonious. My fingers dropped from the wooden plank in concert with the tears.

What I found after my eyes opened was the simplicity of it.

Just as it was before—a wooden board with disparate points reaching towards me.

But that piece of art encapsulated all you were to me. No words can explain why. They never would.

What a strange thing to remind yourself that not one of your senses will ever allow you to understand the breath of the soul. How it shows itself as a form on an icy windshield of a car in winter.

Love, Tabi



It was the eve of the anniversary of Mario's passing. *Kyotographie* had already been underway for some weeks. A handful of exhibitions we'd seen seemed almost to point us back to the year past by: a photo of a father beneath an eclipse; another afflicted with glaucoma, his vision echoed in the pages of a book—its images perforated, blurred, almost too dark to see. Synchronicity, perhaps.

But tonight was to be *Nuit Blanche*—the White Night—the first Saturday in October when artistic events are held in cities all over the world, and somehow, despite COVID-19, Kyoto was running two major arts festivals at once. We were not going to miss it.

We made the ten-minute pilgrimage from our cozy apartment to the nearby Okazaki Park. It is a place designed with sophistication, blending communal and artistic spaces, traditional Japanese architecture with the sharp lines of

modernity. Heian Jingu presides to the north, while the avenue south is flanked by Kyocera and the National Museum of Modern Art. An art lover's paradise. Somehow we had only ever used it as a rest stop after kendo training. The Starbucks nearby has nice outdoor seating.

We arrived to find the courtyard of the Rohm Theatre empty but set for something performative. *Amaterasu II*, the sign said. There was a picture of a *maiko* with red hair. A round stage was marked in tape, and seats were laid out for a handful of musicians. Speakers and lights were arranged about the pillars upholding the second floor. We were early, it seemed.

A wooden construction sat nearby. Titled 動山 (*Ugoku Yama*, "The Moving Mountain"), this was the central meeting point for *Kyotographie*, and it was bizarre. The artist had painstakingly built a miniature roller coaster, entangled in such a way that small groups could sit on



simple benches in pockets between the twisting rails—sit, and watch as little wheeled plates carrying surrealist artworks whizzed by. A pair of traditional Japanese dolls; a golden lion; a set of rubber sausages; a ghost with tusks; a house with a moustachioed head . . . one by one, they would each climb to the top of the mountain and then set off at some speed down the track. What audience there was found it very funny.

We spotted our artsy friends on one of the benches—a photographer, a poet, the owner of a local bar. Standing there, chatting happily in the midst of something unusual, beautiful and long overdue, I felt we might be at the Claddagh during the Galway Arts Festival, or drinking on the banks of the Seine. The same swirls of inspiration entered me, set my mouth to smiling and thoughts a-going. Tabia looked happy.

A crowd gathered about the stage, and we moved to join them. Musicians found their perches in the circle—the lights turned on. An older woman with short, slicked-back, blonde hair stood in a corner, stretching, ready for the performance. I took out my phone.

Music. Cello joined with oboe joined with rich percussion in a deeply unsettling ambient soundscape, part classical, part jazz. The older woman entered the circle with elegant, deliberate strides, her physicality utterly changed. A woman no longer—in the flex of her legs, in the angle of her head, she became a noble demon walking among mortals. From another corner, the maiko emerged, gliding like a goddess, tilting her head. Their dance began.





The moment seemed to stretch out forever as I began recording.

The dancers hold the space like it is alive. Whirling a long, pointed *naginata*, the demon-woman gathers menace about her like the black trails of her waistcoat. Catching the eye of the maiko as she turns, I feel the bodily shock of becoming prey. The phone warms my hands, the minutes stretching on. The demon, weary of chasing and being repelled by the sun-goddess, sits down and builds a den of sadness with just the confused crook of her limbs.

Amaterasu glides over, her hand extending from its long white sleeve, reaching for the woman in black, their fingers almost touching. The hand withdraws.

After that, all I see are the muscles in the demon's back, her staunch stance, the way she shrugs her shoulders. There are tableaux—the dancers wave white fabric, brandish golden fans. The music hits a crescendo and then crashes into silence.

My camera's timer reaches over thirty minutes. The audience comes alive and starts to applaud. The performers gather in a line, bowing deep. The ovation goes on for three encores.

I turn to Tabia. Her eyes are full of tears.





“THE DEAD DO NOT FEAR BEING ALONE OR COLD, AND THEY ARE NOT AFRAID OF THE DARK.”

The next day, we walked to Nijo Castle to see *Kyotographie's* signature event. This year's theme was Echo. In the wake of COVID-19, and to mark the ten-year anniversary of the Tohoku Earthquake, a collection of artists had responded to the collective grief in various ways. Ikebana in the wastes of Fukushima. Two corrugated corridors—one for the pandemic, the other for the sorrow of irradiation. The final room was more hopeful; it contained an organically coiling tube made of bamboo reeds cut in a traditional manner, signaling our interconnectedness and strength. Light shone through the gaps in the reeds. A baby in the room kept crying out.

In the southeast watchtower was a final exhibition. The lights were out. At the entrance, we were given dim torches. On the walls within were pictures of the devastation wrought by the earthquake. A car on a railroad track; a line of sakura trees in bloom above a dried-out riverbed covered in trash. Lines of text seemed to float in the space between—Japanese, English, French. One in particular caught my eye.

“The dead do not fear being alone or cold, and they are not afraid of the dark.”

We emerged under the autumn sky. Many hours of sunshine left.





*Daniel Mulcahy is a third-year JET living in Kyoto city, an editor of the Kyoto JETs newsletter, and a seasoned procrastinator. He has written before for **CONNECT** on the topic of kendo, something he really quite enjoys. If you would like to see some other scribblings by Daniel, you can check out his backburner blog at shingaimumon.wordpress.com.*

それでも、僕らにはゲームがある。



2021
9.30
10.3

A TOKYO GAME SHOW 2021

Nathan Post (Saitama)

Oh, how time flies! A year of lockdowns has passed, we've at last got a vaccine, and things are finally kind of, maybe starting to return to normal. The Tokyo Game Show is also kind of, maybe starting to return to normal this year.

After shifting to an online-only show in 2020, the Tokyo Game Show (TGS) came back in hybrid form this year. There was a pared-down physical venue open to industry insiders available in conjunction with the online show and a public venue held in... VR? Let's take a look.

TOKYO GAME SHOW VR 2021

9.30
10.3

TGS VR

Perhaps the most head-turning development from this year's show was the show itself. While there was indeed something of a limited physical exhibition this year, it was open only to the most *inside* of insiders. But does that mean we, the adoring fans, were left out in the cold? Hell no! Owners of HTC VIVE or Oculus Quest/Rift VR headsets were able to access a virtual TGS venue this year to experience the sights and sounds (but fortunately not smells) of the Tokyo Game Show.

Full disclaimer: I don't actually own any of these headsets, so these impressions are based on second-hand media like articles and YouTube videos. That said, I was able to see quite a bit of what was on offer at TGS VR's exhibits and came away impressed.

Although the exhibits lost some impact since I wasn't seeing them first-hand in VR, the show floor was still impressive. Guests could explore a vague approximation of the three main halls of shows from years past from a first-person perspective. They were full of an exciting mishmash of game worlds and information hubs from various publishers, all under an open techno-future sky like something out of *Wall-E*. Life-size replicas of giant robots, video game characters, and cute anime girls dotted the skyline, while extravagant virtual booths of show floor games lined the avenues.

The show was also something of a game itself. Guests could customize their own little robot avatar and collect clothing and accessories to personalize it by exploring the show floor and watching trailers. Though the experience was all in the first person, and you couldn't actually encounter other guests, so the value of wearing clothing that couldn't be seen outside of a customization menu is questionable. Still, it was an interesting incentive to explore and interact with the exhibits.

The actual content that was being shown was basically just YouTube videos in hovering windows (that didn't even play automatically), and walking the halls solo without being able to see any other guests seemed a bit lonesome, but as an approximation of the extravagance of TGS, it was a very cool experiment to see.

I'd love to see this VR option return next year, especially if it's available on more VR platforms, like PlayStation VR or simple smartphone-based VR headsets.



VR 2021

NEWS FROM TGS ONLINE

While the VR space was an impressive showpiece, the majority of TGS info came from online presentations this year. Do note though that the pandemic is still stalling game development for many studios, so it was a smaller show this year, both in terms of physical size and news. But even so, there was still quite a bit of juicy game info to be had!



NEW *ELDEN RING* INFO

As a collaboration between *Dark Souls* developer FromSoftware and George R.R. Martin of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones* fame, *Elden Ring* was perhaps the biggest game to feature at this year's TGS.

First announced back at E3 2019 with little more than a title, *Elden Ring* finally received a full gameplay trailer earlier this year.

FromSoft's live stream at this year's TGS provided a further development update full of new info for the title.



Elden Ring will follow the dark fantasy style of their previous *Souls* titles, but—in a first for the series—will also feature a seamless open world with various castles and dungeons to explore. Where previous *Souls* titles have had a general order to the content, *Elden Ring* will be completely open, allowing players to discover and challenge different parts of the game in whatever order they'd like.

Players can traverse the world of *Elden Ring* astride a "Reima" (read: ghost horse) that they can summon anytime they're outside a dungeon. According to the stream, the Reima will also play a role in combat and affect how players can tackle encounters.

It will also be the first title in the series to allow the player to find pieces of maps and use them to mark objectives and chart the world. For those unfamiliar with the *Souls* series, it may not sound like much, but it marks a drastic shift from the maze-like style of previous entries.



FromSoft also commented on the series' infamous difficulty, saying that while the game is still designed to be punishing, there are some systems in place that will make it more open to less experienced players as well. Namely, there will be a stealth system, similar to that of their 2019 game *Sekiro*, that will let players instantly take down some foes rather than facing them in more difficult head-on encounters.

It was also explained that the open world nature of the game is meant to give players hitting difficulty walls in some areas the option to turn to other easier areas to explore and level up before returning. The signature cooperative multiplayer of the *Souls* games will also be making a return, which lets struggling lone players call for backup from friends and strangers alike.



Elden Ring is looking to be an exciting new direction for the *Souls* series' first outing on next-gen consoles. It's scheduled to release on February 25, 2022 for the PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5, Xbox One, Xbox Series S, Xbox Series X, and PC.

Microsoft's xCloud Floats to Japan



Microsoft was the only one of the big three console makers to show up at this year's TGS, and they brought some exciting news for fans in Japan (those exist, right?). Microsoft's xCloud game streaming service has been available overseas for some time now as a part of their Game Pass program, but it's finally making its way to Japan!

The service is still in beta, but the promise is



enticing: modern console-quality games playable on (almost) any internet-connected device, à la Netflix. That means you could be playing the latest console or PC releases on your smartphone on the train . . . provided your internet connection can handle it.

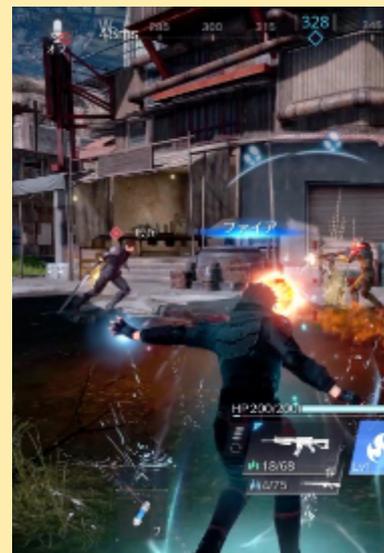
I tried the tech for myself and the potential is definitely there, but it's also still obviously a beta. I've been playing *Psychonauts 2* recently (review incoming, by the way) via Xbox Game Pass. It's a regular copy of the game installed locally on my PC. I figured I'd start a new file on the streaming version to see how it held up. To my surprise, Game Pass had already synced my save file from the installed version on my PC with the streaming version of the game on their servers. My save was right there on my phone, waiting for me to pick up the game where I left off. That's pretty impressive.



What was less impressive, however, was the performance. The game was technically playable, but even on a 200 MB/s home internet connection, the visuals pixelated and blurred frequently. Sometimes it got so bad that I couldn't tell where I was or what I was doing. I expected the input latency to be an issue, since inputs have to travel from my device to their servers and back every time I press a button, but that part was actually pretty responsive. It was just the image quality that was an issue.

As the streaming is now, I wouldn't recommend paying money for it. But it's not actually being sold as a standalone service. Rather, it's an included part of their much more appealing Game Pass program, which lets you pay around \$15 a month to play recent game releases on your Xbox or PC. If the streaming issues are eventually worked out, it could end up being the most appealing part of the service. Here's hoping.





Stop me if you've heard this one: 100-player smartphone battle royale. [STOP] Ok, but what about this one: 100-player smartphone battle royale featuring . . . the magic, summons, and world of *Final Fantasy VII*? Does that sound like a recipe for success? Square Enix sure seems to think so!

The First Soldier was announced back in February alongside the PS5 remaster of *Final Fantasy VII Remake*. And while the remaster is now out, the former has remained somewhat enigmatic. But in their TGS stream, Square Enix showed off some new gameplay and features for the title.

Amusingly enough, this game is going to be an official part of the *Final Fantasy VII* canon. Set 18 years before the events of *FFVII*, *The First Soldier* will cover the events surrounding the development of the Shinra company's iconic SOLDIER-brand of, er, soldiers. It's still yet to be seen how they're going to work a *Final Fantasy* story into what is ostensibly a PvP-only battle royale game, but that seems to be the commitment they're making. So if you want to know all the ins and outs of the series' lore, you're just gonna have to bust out your smartphone and battle some internet tweens on their home turf.

FINAL FANTASY



THE FIRST SOLDIER

Brings the Magic to Battle Royale



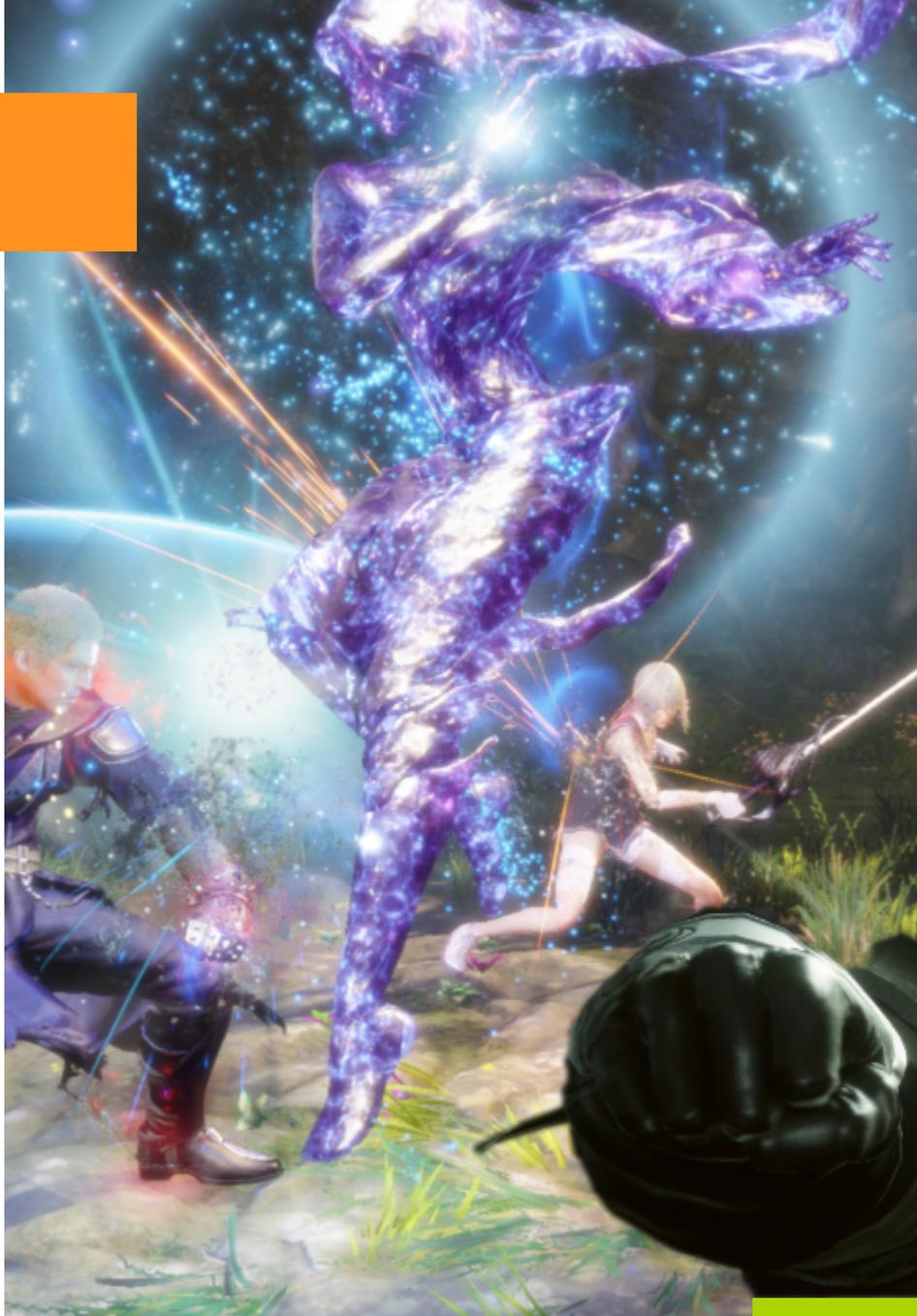
FINAL FANTASY VII THE FIRST SOLDIER

Magic Sale



Newly confirmed in their stream were controller support, a new tutorial system, a training mode, a range of collectables, and the ninja job type. According to creative director Tetsuya Nomura, the game's unusual take on *FFVII* is meant to broaden the scope of the series' fanbase.

The English version of the game still doesn't have a release date, but the Japanese version of *Final Fantasy VII: The First Soldier* was confirmed to release on Android and iOS in November of this year.

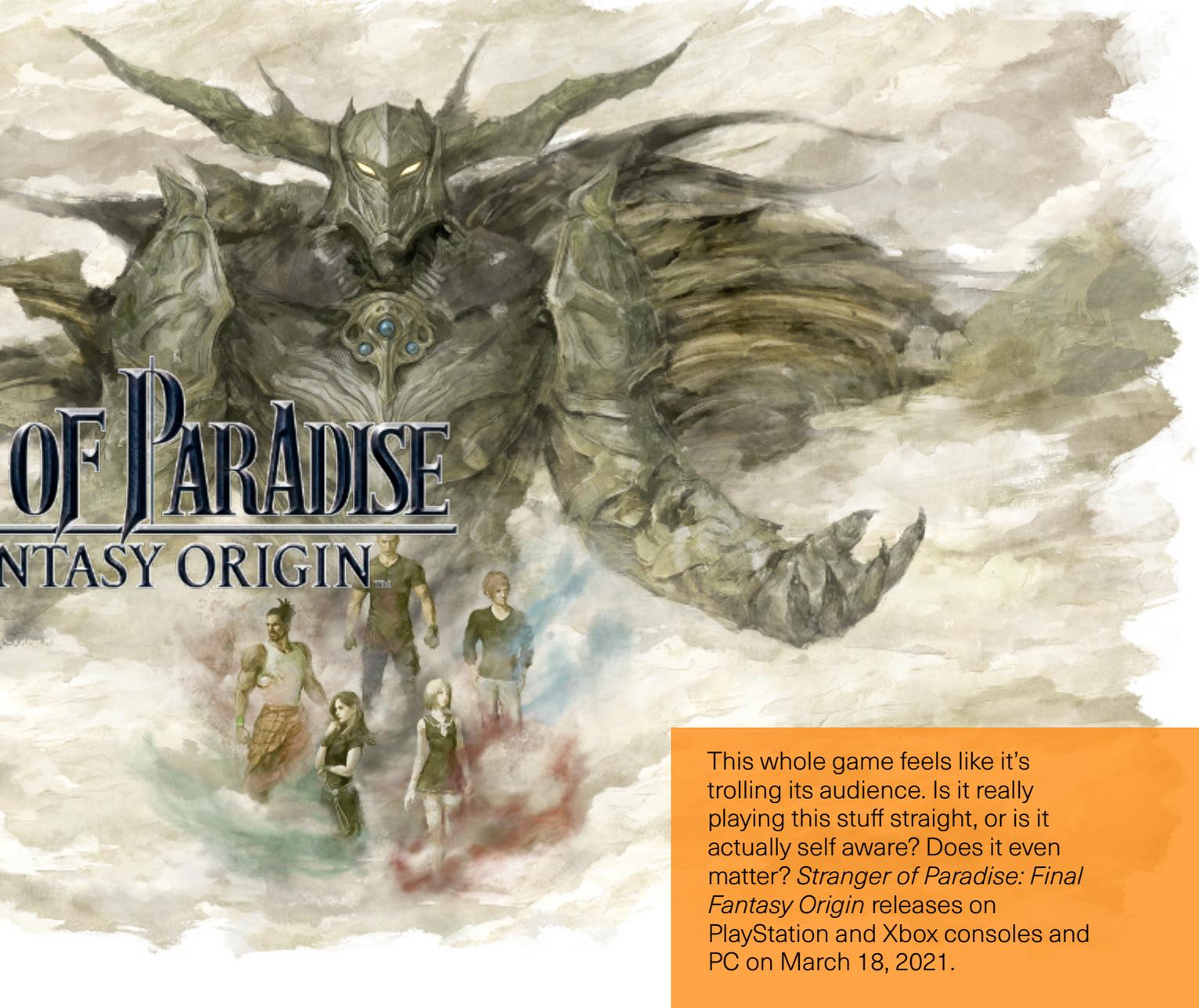


Oh boy, where to even begin with this game? Revealed in an awkward trailer earlier this year where characters straight out of a J.Crew catalog angrily decried “Chaos” every few seconds, *Stranger of Paradise: Final Fantasy Origin* has been a nonstop target of conversation (or maybe just ridicule) on the internet.

As perhaps the most-meme’d game of 2021, *Stranger of Paradise* appears to be sitting on either an untapped pile of gold or an untapped pile of turds, and no one can seem to tell which.

The game is a fantasy action RPG collaboration between Square Enix and Team Ninja, developer of the *Ninja Gaiden* series. The gameplay looks to be pretty standard fare. It’s got swords. It’s got magic. That stuff all looks fine, but that’s not the part people are talking about. The over-the-top try-hard edge of this game would make Shadow the Hedgehog hang up his pistol in embarrassment.

A new trailer for the game debuted at TGS featuring, among other things, a scene where buzz cut-buff-guy protagonist Jack interrupts a very anime speech about heroes and light with a stern “. . . Bullshit!” refuses to elaborate, then pulls out his iPhone and starts blasting Limp Bizkit as he walks away. What is this game!?



This whole game feels like it's trolling its audience. Is it really playing this stuff straight, or is it actually self aware? Does it even matter? *Stranger of Paradise: Final Fantasy Origin* releases on PlayStation and Xbox consoles and PC on March 18, 2021.



Sense of Wonder Night

Back again this year is Sense of Wonder Night, a TGS awards event that highlights projects from game development students and indie games that inspire a sense of excitement and wonder in the audience. A panel of big-name game developers and critics honored their picks in a variety of categories. Below are a few of the standouts from this year's Wonder Night.



Hidden Notes

This Japanese game for smartphones uses both the front and back cameras of the phone to provide a highly unconventional AR (augmented reality) experience. In the game, the player explores a dark room through their phone camera's lens by physically walking around their environment. In the game, you follow footsteps overlain onto the physical world to find hidden objects like notebooks and photos around your room, but all you can see in the game is a small circle of light around your own physical feet. Everything else is pitch black.

Some sequences give you even less to go on, using the phone's front camera to make you close your eyes and listen intently to the game world. Upon discovering some photos, for instance, the players will have to close their eyes and imagine the scene, which will cause audio related to the photo to play. You then use these tidbits of information to piece together the items and clues to solve the story's mysteries. *Hidden Notes* is planned to release on smartphones in winter 2022.

DO NOT BUY THIS GAME

Do Not Buy This Game is a narrative-driven walking simulator style game that is running so far behind schedule that it's still being made as you play it. You explore rooms and hallways that are being hastily built by an overworked game developer as you traverse and interact with them. The developer is a constant narrator who will talk to you as the player and even ask you for input with simple choices as he frantically tries to design a game that will appeal to you. The premise sounds hilarious and the (actual) developer says he wants to draw players in with humor and then deliver a deeper emotional experience. I'm looking forward to seeing if he succeeds. The current release date is specified as "when everything is 100% ready for you to not buy," though a free demo is already available on Steam.



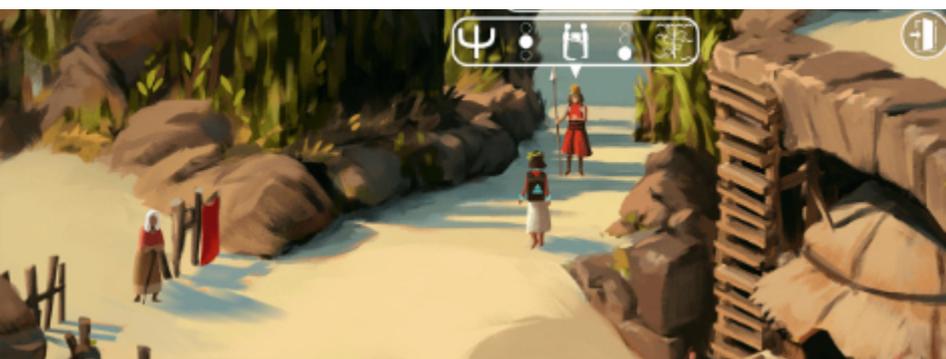


This game is all about language. You're a shipwrecked girl who washes up on a tropical island where all the locals speak in text bubbles of symbols and simple emoji-like icons. To make things worse, the volcano on the island is going to erupt and you're the only one who knows it, so you need to figure out this language and communicate with the people on the island ASAP.

Learning and using the language is the main focus of this game. The player can store sentences and icons they've seen in their inventory, then repeat them to other islanders to see their reactions and try to decipher their meaning. Some are pretty simple, like a low dot, a stick figure waving, then a higher dot. Everyone says this when you meet them so that must be the greeting here. Another shows two dots next to each other, then a figure picking up a square, then an icon of a shell. So "something, something pick up shell," probably. But things get difficult when you see other characters using familiar icons in unfamiliar ways, or strings of symbols and icons you don't understand. As things progress and you get a better handle on icon meanings and orders, you begin to not just listen and repeat, but successfully construct your own sentences using an ever-growing inventory of icons and symbols drawn from all the people you've encountered.

To anyone who's tried learning a language, the experience this game presents is *immediately* relatable (well maybe excluding the volcano part). As a translator living abroad who is still learning something new about Japanese every day, this was absolutely my game of the show from Wonder Night. *Eloquence* is still a ways off, with a planned release of 2023, but it has a free playable demo available on Steam right now, which I will absolutely be checking out.

These were just a few of the games shown off at Sense of Wonder Night that stood out to me, but all of the games shown had something unusual and striking in their design. Details of these games and the others can be found on the official TGS Sense of Wonder Night 2021 website. Definitely keep an eye out for them in the months and years to come.



[Back to Contents](#)

Physical or Virtual It's Still

TGS

TGS 2021 was a smaller show than years past, but with some big announcements, a first-ever VR version, and impressive titles like *Elden Ring* (plus weird-ass titles like *Stranger of Paradise*), there were still a lot of great things to see, read, watch, and do.

It's a little hard not to miss the hustle and bustle of the physical show, but in a year that has seen so much hardship for everyone, the fact that TGS is not only still happening, but providing online venues and even a whole virtual world for the fans to dive into is a bit of a light in the dark, to say the least.

Hopefully things will be doing well enough to support a full physical show next year, but even if they aren't, I'll still have you covered one way or another. Game on, friends!

Nathan Post is a former JET who works as a game translator at Gumi Inc. When he's not writing this article, he can be found playing AS SORA IN SMAAAAAASH! WOOOO WE DID IT, BABY! MEMES DO COME TRUE! BEST BOY BEST BOY!



NOVEMBER Releases

Fergus Gregg (Kobe)

MOVIES

November 3

- What Did You Eat Yesterday? (2021)
- Riverside Mukkolita (2021)

November 5

- Eternals (2021)
- Respect (2021)
- Antebellum (2020)
- Pinocchio (2019)

November 6

- Keep Rolling (2020)
- Your Turn (2019)

November 12

- Malignant (2021)
- Chaos Walking (2021)
- The Ice Road (2021)
- Falling (2020)
- The Man Who Sold His Skin (2020)
- Dawn of the Beast (2021)
- The Donut King (2020)
- Detective Chinatown 2 (2018)
- City Hall (2020)
- Kaizoku Sentai: Ten Gokaiger (2021)
- Fighter (2020)
- Kôkaku kidôtai SAC_2045 Jizoku kanô senshô (2021)
- Musicophilia (2021)

November 13

- Master Ji Gong (2021)

November 19

- Mosul (2019)
- Kaithi (2019)
- The Last Frontier (2020)
- The Book of Fish (2021)
- Little Girl (2020)
- Mole Song Final (2021)
- Come and Go (2020)
- The Cursed Sanctuary X (2021)
- Zutto Dokushin de Iru Tsomori? (2021)

November 20

- A Jewish Life (2021)

November 26

- Dear Evan Hansen (2021)
- Encanto (2021)
- The Dark and the Wicked (2020)
- The Last Warrior (2017)
- The Savior For Sale (2021)
- Eureka: Eureka Seven Hi-Evolution (2021)

November 27

- The Red Chapel (2009)

GAMES



November 2

- Giants Uprising - Steam Early Access (PC)
- World War Z (Switch)
- Tunche (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- Demon Turf (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, Switch)
- Conway: Disappearance at Dahlia View (PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, Switch)

November 3

- Time Loader (PC)

November 4

- Mobile Suit Gundam: Battle Operation Code Fairy (PS4, PS5)

November 5

- Call of Duty: Vanguard (PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S)

November 9

- Forza Horizon 5 (PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S)
- Blue Reflection: Second Light (PC, PS4, PS5, Switch)
- Clunky Hero - Steam Early Access (PC)
- Jurassic World Evolution 2 (PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S)

November 11

- Synthetik 2 - Steam Early Access (PC)
- Grand Theft Auto: The Trilogy – The Definitive Edition (PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, Switch)
- PUBG: New State (Android, iOS)
- Bright Memory: Infinite (PC)
- Breakwaters - Steam Early Access (PC)

November 12

- Shin Megami Tensei 5 (Switch)
- Game & Watch: The Legend of Zelda

November 16

- Sherlock Holmes Chapter One (PC, PS5, Xbox Series X/S)
- Moncage (PC, iOS, Android)
- The Last Stand: Aftermath (PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox Series X/S)

November 18

- Bloodrayne: Revamped, Bloodrayne 2: Revamped (PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

November 19

- Battlefield 2042 (PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S)
- Pokemon Brilliant Diamond, Pokemon Shining Pearl (Switch)

November 30

- Evil Genius 2: World Domination (PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S)

November TBD

- Icarus (PC)
- My Singing Monsters Playground (PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, Switch)

Sources:

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

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





Television Recommendation: Midnight Mass

Marco Cian (Hyogo)

Midnight Mass is a deeply personal passion project of its director, Mike Flanagan. So perhaps it's fitting that your enjoyment of the series will largely boil down to your personal outlook on organized religion. If you're someone with a negative perception of religion, then this show isn't for you. If you're someone who identifies as spiritual but not religious, it might strike a chord with you. But if you're someone like me, who's a real sucker for meditations on faith, then you'll probably find *Midnight Mass* to be enjoyable yet slightly prosaic.

Many people have compared *Midnight Mass* to the works of Stephen King, given its New England locale, its spooky atmosphere, and its ensemble cast. While I can definitely see King's influence in the show, I think a better comparison is with HBO's *The Young Pope*. Both shows are treatises on faith and religion with a distinctly Roman Catholic flavour, both rely on moody, atmospheric cinematography, and both centre their emotional cores on passionate, poetic monologues.

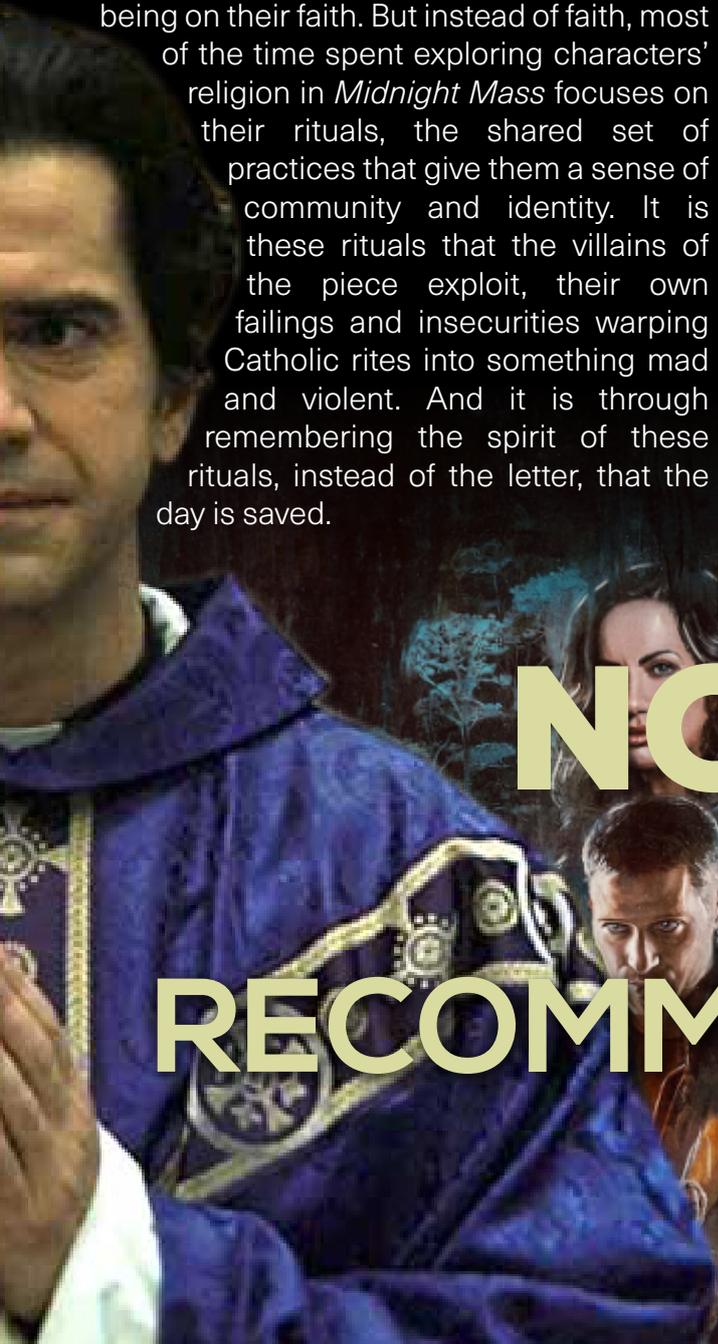
However, *Midnight Mass* is simply not as willing to embrace its inherent silliness and absurdity, in stark contrast to *The Young Pope*. You will find no LMFAO montages or kangaroos in *Mass*. And while the cast gives their all, there are moments where they cannot hide the inherent corniness of their lines. Like King, Flanagan is very good at delivering something simple and basic enough to appeal to a broad audience. This is not an insult. Popular fiction, by definition, must appeal to as broad an audience as possible. However, if you are hoping for something a little more niche or nuanced, you might walk away from *Midnight Mass* disappointed. It doesn't have the courage to say much on God and the universe beyond "Well, it's a mystery, innit?" And it demands to be taken seriously, with nary a joke or moment of levity.



That being said, *Mass* is more aware than many works of the distinction between faith and ritual when it comes to religion. Most religious villains are either mad zealots or con artists, with the emphasis of their villainy being on their faith. But instead of faith, most of the time spent exploring characters' religion in *Midnight Mass* focuses on their rituals, the shared set of practices that give them a sense of community and identity. It is these rituals that the villains of the piece exploit, their own failings and insecurities warping Catholic rites into something mad and violent. And it is through remembering the spirit of these rituals, instead of the letter, that the day is saved.

This is really the deciding factor in your enjoyment of the show. Those who find faith suspect on principle might find the show dogmatic, while those with a more evangelical religiosity might not like how the church as an institution comes out redeemed. However, for all its faults *Midnight Mass* has the passion and earnestness of a truly devoted convert, for which I can't help but enjoy it.

Marco Cian is a first-year ALT in Toyooka, Hyogo. His students call him "Rich Man", though he still does not know why. He reads a lot, and you can find him on his Youtube channel, [È quasi milione](#), where he talks about fantasy works.



NOVEMBER REVIEWS & RECOMMENDATIONS

がっこうぐらし!

November is here and so is the inevitable Halloween hangover. No more cheesy slashers I say! No more schlocky monster features! After Halloween, horror media generally takes a back seat to the feel-good Christmas season, but if you're looking for a palette cleanser that features a hint of suffering, I think it's time you give *Gakkou Gurashi! (School Live!)* a read.

School Live! presents itself as a typical slice-of-life at first, as the reader follows the ongoing activities of the School Life club and its members Takeya Yuki, Ebisuzawa Kurumi, Wakasa Yuuri and staff advisor Sakura Megumi. The initial focal point, Takeya Yuki, is your typical insufferably optimistic protagonist of a high school manga, but it's quickly revealed in the first chapter that something is incredibly wrong with the world these girls inhabit and how Yuki perceives it. Frames of dilapidated, blood-stained classrooms and corridors contrast to the bright and populated hallways that we see from Yuki's perspective.

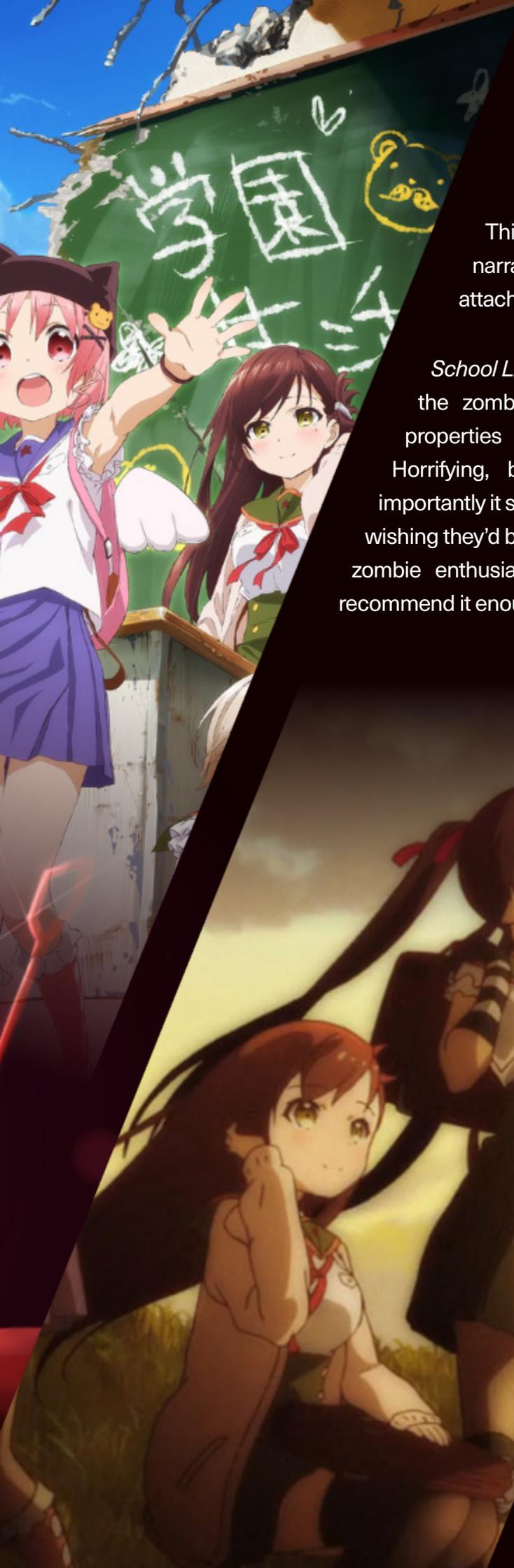
The School Life club live, sleep, and farm food in their high school because at some point in the story's chronology, the world fell apart due to a zombie apocalypse. Here *School Live!* sets itself apart from other zombie manga. Where series like *Highschool of the Dead* or *I am a Hero* tell their stories with a tongue in cheek humour, focus on dramatic portrayals of societal and mental unravelling, *School Live!* finds its sweet spot in its portrayal of adolescent innocence.

Recommended Manga

GAKKOU GURASHI!

Fergus Gregg (Kobe)

These girls aren't action heroes ready to improvise weapons at a moment's notice, they're just regular kids trying to get by. This is epitomised in *School Live!*'s "less is more" mentality as it keeps gore to a minimum and excludes shock horror. The commitment to this attitude is also reflected in the portrayal of zombies as little more than shambling silhouettes, which allows the focus to shift from rotting bags of flesh to the more compelling horror of vulnerable members of society in mortal danger.



This is invaluable towards immersing readers in the narrative and the characters, allowing readers to grow attached to them.

School Live! is a strong horror manga and a worthy addition to the zombie sub-genre because it embraces all the right properties of this genre. It's graphic but never gratuitous. Horrifying, but never needlessly disturbing. Perhaps most importantly it shines a light on the human condition, without readers wishing they'd been left in the dark. *School Live!* is a must-read of any zombie enthusiast and any horror manga fanatic and I cannot recommend it enough for your post-Halloween entertainment.

Fergus is a youthful first-year JET who has stepped into Japan bright-eyed and looking for adventure. When not obsessing over horror films and literature, he can be found exploring Hyogo in search of mystery.



Album recommendation: PILGRIMAGE OF THE SOUL

Release date: September 17th, 2021
Ryon Morrin (Hokkaido)

For the past twenty-two years, Tokyo's MONO have been crafting grandiose soundscapes. They write music that links serene moments of calm and room-filling walls of sound.

Although often considered to be a part of the post-rock scene, MONO aim to transcend any labelling of their lusciously melodic, emotionally powerful music.

On *Pilgrimage of the Soul*, the tone is consistently sombre and dark throughout, with brief breaks into periods of resolution. These moments are deeply satisfying after the bleak, sorrowful sounds that had come before, but they are not to be mistaken for happiness; rather, they are a taste of closure after a traumatic experience, or a temporary resurfacing from the depths of a deep depression. This is not a "feel good" record; it contains little warmth or brightness. Those feelings are seldom and fleeting. However, within the darkness of *Pilgrimage of the Soul* exists a raw, unfiltered beauty.





Though purely instrumental, MONO are capable of heavily influencing the emotional state of listeners. Many tracks sound gargantuan in size, an effect partially created by thickly applied reverb and delay on lead and rhythm guitars. They often feel overwhelming and the feelings they inspire are impossible to fight off; an ideal setting for this record is a dimly lit room with a place to lay down and focus on the changing state of the heart. Often beginning as a gentle whisper, songs like “The Auguries” slowly build up to crescendos that are impossibly dense and crushingly loud. In truth, *Pilgrimage of the Soul* is a tragic film that will bring even an iron heart to tears. “And Eternity in an Hour”, with its gorgeously melancholic piano and string arrangements, would fit perfectly as part of a film score.

Without uttering a single word, MONO pour out the contents of their hearts into each song on *Pilgrimage of the Soul*, writing an ambiguous story of profound grief and despair. It is filled with scenes of all-encompassing sadness, genuine fear, and blinding anger, the most punishing elements of the human experience. But when these moments pass, they are replaced by concluding feelings of acceptance, relief, and sometimes, triumph for having survived the most gruelling battles in life.

You can stream *Pilgrimage of the Soul* now on Spotify.

Ryon Morrin is a third-year ALT based in Shintotsukawa, Hokkaido. In his free time, he enjoys discovering new music, hiking in the mountains, and playing rhythm games at the arcade.





Do You Know Noh?

The story behind this unique form of theater and how a tiny island far from Tokyo became Japan's preeminent center for Noh.

Kimberly Fitzgerald (Niigata)

“I think my nose is too big,” I laughed as the Noh actress gracefully accepted the mask I handed back to her. Made entirely of Japanese cypress, masks such as the one that crushed my American-sized nose have been worn by Noh actors since the 14th century. Instead of relying on facial expressions to convey emotion, Noh actors simply angle their faces to catch different lights. “It really does look like you’re sad when you look down,” said our interpreter, showing me some pictures of myself to look at.

The Noh actress assisting me adjust the mask was part of a small but dedicated troupe of Noh performers at Sado Island’s Kusakari Shrine and Noh stage. The Sado Tourism Association invited a group of Niigata-based JETs, myself included, to a tour of the island and a Noh theater workshop in hopes of bringing attention to these skilled performers trying to keep a traditional form of theater alive. As Japan’s fifth largest island, Sado boasts an impressive array of natural beauty, including terraced rice

fields, rocky coves, and the largest lake in Niigata Prefecture, Lake Kamo. The island is not only known for its nature, but also its rich history and culture—including Noh, a unique and underrated form of theater.



The island is not only known for its nature, but also its rich history and culture—including Noh, a unique and underrated form of theater.

Sado Island was once a place of banishment. Starting possibly as early as the 6th century, the shogunate would send people who questioned their authority or didn’t succumb to their wishes to Sado. “People hear terms like ‘banishment’ and ‘exile’ and assume Sado was a place for criminals,” claimed our tour guide Tsukakoshi Takayuki, “but in reality it was more a land of intellectuals.” Intellectuals banished to Sado include ex-Emperor Juntoku, influential Buddhist priest Nichiren, and poet Hozumi no Asomi Oyu. Japan’s leading Noh actor, Zeami, also found himself there after losing favor with the shogunate.

It was Zeami’s father Kanami that turned Noh into the form of theater that it is today—theater based on songs and



dances performed by actors wearing masks and ornate costumes. The stories unfold through a slow methodical dance arranged to musical elements and spoken word. It is said that profound meaning can be found in even the slightest movements of a Noh actor. The music features a wooden flute and various sized drums, as well as chanting. One unique aspect of Noh is that often the main character of a play is not a human being, but rather a ghost, god, or spirit.

However, in my opinion, one of the most iconic aspects of this form of theater is the masks. In Noh, the main character performs while wearing a mask. Hand-carved out of wood, many masks are highly valued as pieces of art—so much so that the actors assisting us in the Sado tour have

separate masks for rehearsals and performances. The performance masks are just too precious to risk damaging while practicing.

The masks are traditionally carved to be expressionless, thus putting the onus on the actors' own body movements to convey emotions. The eye holes of Noh masks are noticeably small, which greatly limits an actor's visibility. Fortunately, the simple stage design and rare use of props helps reduce the risk of the actor walking into a cast member or off the stage.

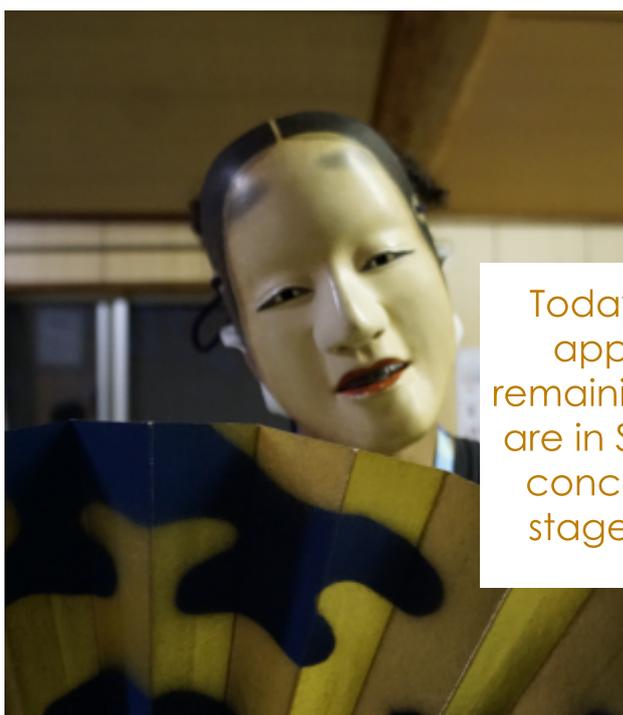
While Zeami's presence on Sado island certainly helped to bring Noh to the region, it was Okubo Nagayasu, the first magistrate of Sado, who was the character most responsible for the proliferation of Noh throughout the island. Okubo, a Noh actor himself, heavily patronized the art; during the time of Okubo's governance, many Noh stages were built and troupes formed. (1)

Although Noh as an art form was traditionally performed only for the upper-class, Sado, lacking in upper-class citizens, allowed farmers and peasants to watch performances for free. Its popularity spread quickly throughout the island. According to Mr. Tsukakoshi, at the height of Noh on Sado, there were as many as 200 Noh stages on the island. Today, out of Japan's

approximately 100 remaining Noh stages, 32 are in Sado—the largest concentration of Noh stages in the country. (2)

However, Noh on Sado island was slightly different from the version enjoyed on the mainland. Stages on Sado were built facing out into the open air. Audiences would watch while sitting under the open sky. This open air set-up allowed for couples and families to bring boxed meals to eat and drink while enjoying the performance. The shows also lasted all day. There would be three performances, each with their own story geared towards different audiences. The early morning performance would often be a well-known fairy tale or folk story for young families. The mid-day performance would involve a love story for couples, while the final performance, under the night sky, would often be a scary story featuring ghosts or demons.

Much like Shakespeare, Noh actors were traditionally all male. But over time, Sado allowed for female actors. We had the opportunity to talk to three of these ladies and try our own hands at Noh acting. The ladies emphasized how acting through a mask was all about small graceful movements. They taught us some standard poses and the proper way to walk across the stage. Tip—don't lift



Today, out of Japan's approximately 100 remaining Noh stages, 32 are in Sado—the largest concentration of Noh stages in the country.





your heels and move very slowly. I received a firm “No, no,” after tripping over my own feet trying to turn around. I tried blaming the stumble on my very limited visibility, but the actress simply replied, “You must root yourself firmly; become one with the stage.”

“In such a fast-paced world, sometimes it’s good to slow down,” expressed another of the actresses. While I agree with the sentiment, I’d like to suggest an additional theory for why Noh actors walk so slow—they can hardly see out of those masks!

Sado island still offers Noh performances for free (or a very nominal fee) from April to November. The Sado Tourism Association [website](#) has a full list of dates and locations if you ever want to see this strange and beautiful form of theater for yourself.

Kimberly Fitzgerald is in her third-year in Japan and has loved every minute of it. She enjoys hiking and exploring everything Japan and Niigata have to offer. When not planning her next trip or trying to recreate that one thing she ate at that one restaurant, she enjoys annoying her friends and neighbors with her endless questions. She hopes that her articles answer some questions you might have had yourself, or inspire you to get out and explore Niigata.

Sources:

- (1) <https://bit.ly/2Y1JUxP>
- (2) <https://bit.ly/2XPLmn7>





My Journey Across Shikoku as an Accidental Pilgrim

Temple 35, Kiyotakiji,
in Tosa, Kochi

Amber Bunnell
(Tokushima Prefecture)

The 88 Temple Pilgrimage has been altered over the centuries before becoming the route we know it as today, but one thing has remained the same: there is no wrong way to do the pilgrimage.





It was a misty Sunday in mid-October when I became an accidental pilgrim. From a temple perched on a mountaintop, an hour and a half away from my new home in rural Tokushima, I studied the mountain range below in awe, the way it stretched endlessly to the horizon. I'd left my car parked in a tiny lot on the side of a cliff, hiked through a bamboo forest, passed through an enormous temple gate and climbed a hundred stairs for this view. The air smelled sweet, like incense and rain. I could see my breath.

Earlier that day, I'd googled the Shikoku 88 Temple Pilgrimage on a whim and found the temple nearest me: Number 66. *Unpenji*. Later,

inside the temple *nokyosho*, the small administrative office that sold things like omamori charms and engraved walking sticks, I eyed the different designs of the *nokyosho* pilgrimage books. They each had bright colors woven together in different patterns—some pocket-sized, some larger, all with 88 blank pages. I chose one with a deep blue background and red flowers. The temple staff signed it with a long calligraphy brush, in purposeful, unwavering strokes.

I didn't consider myself a pilgrim, an *ohenro* (お遍路), yet. But this impromptu visit to Unpenji would set into motion a years-long journey around the wild, mesmerizing island of Shikoku.

A 1200-Year-Old Tradition

The Shikoku 88 Temple Pilgrimage is known as *ohenro* in Japanese, a word which can be used to mean both *pilgrimage* and *pilgrim*. It begins in Tokushima and circles Shikoku's perimeter, stretching through Kochi and Ehime before ending in Kagawa. The 88 temples along the pilgrimage are a collection of sacred sites where the 9th century Buddhist monk Kobo Daishi (also known as Kukai) is said to have trained or visited (or been born, in the case of Temple 75, *Zentsuji*). As a young man, Kobo Daishi traveled to China and brought a collection of Esoteric Buddhist practices back to Japan, before establishing a monastery at the sacred site



Example of a stamped and signed page from the author's *nokyosho*, received at Temple 66, Unpenji



Front cover of the author's *nokyosho*.



Another benefit of pilgrimage_
The workout provided by climbing
all the stairs. (Temple 35, *Kiyotakiji*
in Tosa, Kochi)

of Mt. Koya. He would later be known as the founder of Shingon Buddhism.

The 88 Temple Pilgrimage has been altered over the centuries before becoming the route we know it as today, but one thing has remained the same: there is no *wrong* way to do the pilgrimage. The temples can be visited in any order. The pilgrimage can be completed in one go, or it can be broken into chunks and completed over time. Pilgrims travel by foot, car, bus, motorcycle, and bicycle. Some pay to go on guided tours. Some hitchhike, like a man from Hokkaido I met at Temple 29, *Tosa Kokubunji*; he'd been hitchhiking Japan for two years and was doing the pilgrimage a second time. There's also no *wrong* reason to become a pilgrim. Some become ohenro for religious reasons, or to pray

Temple 26, *Kongochoji*,
in Muroto, Kochi



Temple 25, *Shishoji*, in Muroto, Kochi



for an illness to be healed. I once met an elderly couple in Kagawa—the wife with a headscarf wrapped around her short, lost hair, the husband steadying her with his arm as they meticulously lit incense. I don't remember the temple number. I do remember praying for them.

Other pilgrims come out of an appreciation for the hiking trails and wild nature of Shikoku, or for self-discovery. And while you may see pilgrims in the traditional white jacket and triangular straw hat, there is no mandated pilgrim uniform.

No matter the reasons for your visit, there are some temple basics most pilgrims adhere to. Bow before entering through the temple gate. Find the basin of water

near the entrance and use one of the dippers to wash your hands and mouth. All temples on the pilgrimage will have a *daishido* (大師堂), a hall in the temple dedicated to Kobo Daishi, and a *hondo* (本堂), or main hall. Make your way to one (or both), and place a coin in the offering box—five yen coins are the most sacred. Place your palms together, bow, and say a prayer (or recite your sutras). Finally, visit the *nokyosho* office and pay 300 yen to have the temple staff stamp and sign the corresponding page in your book.

If you'd prefer to simply wander the grounds, appreciate the architecture and the history of the ancient ground you find yourself on, that's perfectly acceptable too.

Temple 24, *Hotsumisakiji*, in Muroto, Kochi



Modern-Day Pilgrims

"Kobo Daishi was a great businessman," my friend Naoko likes to say. "He saved the economy of Shikoku."

It is undeniable that a robust industry has sprung up around *ohenro*, including bus tours, restaurants and souvenir shops in remote locales, and *shukubo*, temple-run inns for pilgrims. While the image of Kobo Daishi may be of an ascetic traveling alone with few worldly possessions, a substantial portion of modern pilgrims are driven by tourism. They want to experience the good food, beautiful views, and local hospitality of the island.

I admit that I owe a lot to Kobo Daishi. His pilgrimage has brought me to places I would





But now, more than any precise Buddhist ritual, I know that the most precious thing about ohenro is the opportunity to feel everything.

have never discovered on my own. Thanks to him, I know that the seaside trails in Muroto, right below Temple 24, *Hotsumisakiji*, offer the most spectacular view of the sun rising above the Pacific Ocean. I know that the longest ropeway in western Japan spans a stunning green canyon in southern Tokushima, providing access to *Tairyuji*, Temple 21. I know that each October the neighborhood kids who live around Temple 39, *Enkoji*, perform a centuries-old dance dressed in gold pants, colorful scarves, and deer antlers.

Of course, the pilgrimage has connected me to people too. I've completed different parts of the journey with different people, and with different purposes in mind. The temples farthest from me, deep in the mountains of Kochi Prefecture, I explored with friends on a car trip. We spent the entire time laughing, taking photos of sunsets and waterfalls, turning the music in the car up as loud as it could go.

I visited the temples nearest me in central Tokushima alone, the day after my grandmother died. I drove for hours in silence. I don't remember much of that trip except for the beauty of Temple 6, *Anrakuji*,

where I tried not to cry while watching koi fish swim circles in a pond.

I did most of Kagawa on day trips with my partner, during the worst of the pandemic. We climbed hundreds of empty stairs leading up to the hondo, *GO TO OHENRO* posters plastered on bulletin boards around us. From the steep top of Temple 71, *Iyadaniji*, I thought, *This is the man I want to spend my life with.*

Most recently, I took a friend on medical leave from work with me to the Pacific coast in southern Kochi. At Temple 23, *Shinshoji*, we wrote prayers for her recovery on wooden blocks and then hung them in the wind, among dozens of other wishes. We were so close to the sea that the air around us was salty.

"Are you okay?" I asked her as we made our way slowly back down the stairs. She looked tired.

"Let's do another one," she said.

An Ongoing Journey

Despite being a fourth-year pilgrim, I often forget the rules of how to wash my hands and pray. In my early days visiting temples, I felt

self-conscious about my lack of expertise, and was nervous about offending the other pilgrims or temple staff. Do I bow before or after walking through the gate? Which hand do I wash first?

But now, more than any precise Buddhist ritual, I know that the most precious thing about ohenro is the opportunity to feel everything. Feel the cold water on your hands as you wash them at the temple gate. Smell the incense floating in the air as you make your way to the hondo to pray. Hear the brief clank of metal as your coin enters the collection box, and the chants of the pilgrims next to you

reciting their sutras. Feel your prayer, whatever that looks like for you—eyes closed, palms together, thinking about God, or your family, or simply taking in the tranquility around you. For a moment, the rest of the world becomes quiet, 88 times.

Amber Bunnell was a JET from 2016-2019, based in Tokushima. She is a licensed English and Japanese teacher, and co-founder of [Tsunagu Mima World Community](#). When not teaching or volunteering, Amber enjoys camping and travel, and is obsessed with onsen. Follow her at [ambersensei.mima](#) on [Instagram](#).



Sign pointing the way to the daishido at Temple 38, *Kongofukuji*, in Tosashimizu, Kochi



Visitors write wishes and prayers on wooden blocks and leave them hanging at the temple in the hope that they are granted.



Each temple has a water basin near the entrance for visitors to wash their hands and mouth, an act that symbolizes purifying themselves for the temple

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Never trust atoms; they make up everything.
— Kimberly Fitzgerald

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"But part of getting to know yourself is to unknow yourself—to let go of the limiting stories you've told yourself about who you are so that you aren't trapped by them, so you can live your life and not the story you've been telling yourself about your life." — Lori Gottlieb, Maybe You Should Talk to Someone

WELLNESS DESIGNER

Emily Griffith

You can't wait for inspiration, you have to go after it with a club" — Jack London

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"Everyone should believe in something. I believe I will have another coffee."
— Unknown

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"Many of the normal motives of civilised life—snobbishness, money-grubbing, fear of the boss etc.—had simply ceased to exist. . . It was simply a temporary and local phase in an enormous game that is being played over the whole surface of the earth. But it lasted long enough to have its effect upon anyone who experienced it." — George Orwell, Homage to Catalonia



War on Maskne!

10 Tips for Clearer Skin

Kaity Hamill (Niigata)

The leaves have turned, the cool air is starting to settle in across Japan, and if you're anything like me, your skin is ecstatic about that. The humidity of Japanese summers plus the confinement of a face mask combine to create the perfect ecosystem for acne to thrive. Even though summer is gone, if your skin is still suffering under your mask, try out these tips to help you win the war on "*maskne*."





Make sure that your mask is clean!

Only wear a mask for one day. All sorts of stuff gets on those bad boys and just grows overnight, so make sure you're not sticking all of that back onto your face! If you're using a reusable mask, hand wash them with a fragrance-free laundry detergent.

Try toning your mask.

Try spraying your mask with a spray toner before you wear it. I recommend a spray that is salicylic acid-based since that's a great ingredient for preventing clogged pores! Tea tree oil-based ones are another good choice since tea tree oil is antibacterial and antifungal. Also, make sure your mask dries completely before you wear it!

Kaity's Recommendation:

[Lush's Tea Tree Toner Water](#)



This may seem obvious, but wash your face!

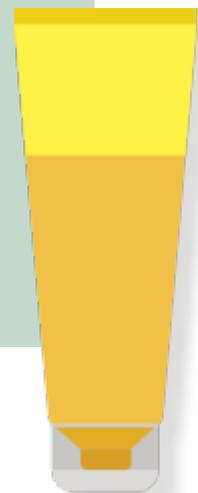
Your face is gross; you need to wash it. Even if all you can muster is using a facial cleansing wipe, do what you can.

Wash it in the morning and at night. Overnight, your skin gets hair oils all over it (from your pillowcase). If you don't wash it in the morning before putting a mask on, you're trapping that oil and clogging up your pores. Once you're home for the day, wash your face again. Throughout the day, you've exposed your face to all sorts of bacteria, germs, and pollution—not to mention that acne-thriving mask environment—so it's important to clean it up.

Kaity's Recommendation:

[April Skin's Foam Cleanser](#)

I live for this face wash. It has an amazing combination of salicylic acid and calendula that is perfect for fighting acne on sensitive skin.



Exfoliation is vital.

Even if you're diligent about washing your face, there's still stuff on there that normal face washing can't reach (dead skin cells in particular). Exfoliating helps to make sure that there is nothing around to clog your pores; it's particularly helpful in preventing whiteheads and blackheads. You should be exfoliating once to twice a week. Do *not* exfoliate every day as this irritates your skin and can make it worse instead of better.

There are two main kinds of exfoliating: chemical and physical. Chemical exfoliants are acids that aid in removing built-up layers of dead skin cells and excess oil. These exfoliants can get deeper into your skin than physical ones. AHA, BHA, PHA, glycolic acid, salicylic acid, and lactic acid, are all chemical exfoliants.

Kaity's Recommendation:

[Suisai Beauty Clear Powder Wash](#)

These enzyme powder exfoliants are perfectly measured out for you and are generally pretty gentle on skin.

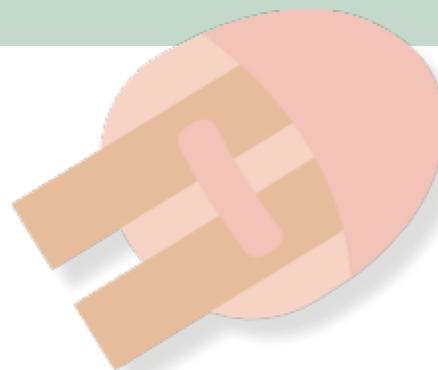




Physical exfoliants are things like scrubs, face washing brushes, or basically, anything that physically takes things away from your skin. Physical exfoliants can't get as deep as chemical ones but can be great for dry patches since they'll get the dead skin off of you right away (that way, it can't clog your pores!). You don't have to buy a new face scrub to exfoliate—you can always combine your usual face wash with a brush to help you get a deeper clean.

Kaity's Recommendation:

[Silicone Face Brush](#)



The type of exfoliation you use is totally based on your skin. For some people, chemical exfoliants don't sit well. For others, physical ones are too harsh. Or maybe, you even do best with a routine that uses a combination of the two. This is something that takes some time and testing to figure out; but please, never use a peel-off mask or nose strip—they're terrible for your skin!

"Hydrate or diehydrate": use that moisturizer!

Your skin needs a barrier between it and your mask. Having a layer of moisturizer will help your skin be less irritated by your mask. Think of it as a little shield for your face!

If you have oily skin, it is a total myth that you don't need moisturizer! You may think that it will make your skin oilier, but actually, it's the opposite. If you wash your face and don't moisturize, your skin will overproduce oils to help replenish what you washed away. Basically, moisturizer = less oil production. That being said, if you have oily skin, don't opt for a heavy cream—go for a lighter moisturizer. A non-comedogenic (a fancy way to say it won't clog your pores) moisturizer is key for acne-prone skin.

Kaity's Recommendation:

[April Skin's Gel Cream](#)

The artemisia and squalene in this cream are a great combo for sensitive skin. The gel consistency also helps it to not be too heavy for oilier skin types.

Mask material matters.

Maybe you haven't thought about this, but it does make a difference! You want to do what you can to keep your face less sweaty, that way, your pores can stay nice and clear. It takes some time and money, but explore different fabrics to see what your skin prefers. Cotton is a great fabric to use: it's breathable and shouldn't irritate your skin.

SPF is your BFF.

You should be wearing sunscreen every day, especially if you struggle with acne! Despite what the dreaded mask tan lines may lead you to believe, sunlight can get through your mask. The sun's ultraviolet rays can increase inflammation and redness, darken acne scars, and create new breakouts. So it's important to always protect your skin! Opt for a face-specific sunscreen that is non-comedogenic so you don't put anything too heavy on there.



Kaity's Recommendation:

Curel SPF 50

Curel is a super great brand for sensitive skin. All their products are non-comedogenic.



Our love/hate relationship with makeup ...

Acne makes you self-conscious, especially in a country where, somehow, teenagers have better skin than you (I'm not salty about it), so it's understandable if you want to cover it up. Unfortunately, masking your maskne with makeup is only going to make it worse.

All that makeup clogs pores and makes your breakouts worse. It can even lead to infecting your acne. Your skin needs to breathe, so the best thing you can do is go makeup free. That's not for everyone, though, so at least try to keep your mask area makeup free the best you can.





Don't. Pick.

Stop touching your face! I know it's tempting to pop those whiteheads, but you gotta stop (I'm mostly directing this at myself). Popping your pimples might feel super satisfying, but it's going to make them stick around longer (and possibly scar!).

Instead, try using a spot treatment to zap those zits! Salicylic acid is great for non-inflammatory acne (whiteheads and blackheads), and benzoyl peroxide is a solid choice for inflammatory acne (papules, pustules, nodules, cystic—basically, the red,

angry, and sometimes, painful stuff). Tea tree oil and sulfur products are also good alternatives for these two.

Pimples pop—whether you do it yourself or fate decides that it's time. When they do, it is super important to not touch it. You want to keep the area as clean as you can so it doesn't get irritated and infected. The best way to do this is by using acne patches. These incredible little creations suck all the junk out of a popped zit, helping it clear up faster. Patches are also great for sticking on acne that hasn't opened up and will keep you (and your mask) from touching and irritating the acne.



See a dermatologist.

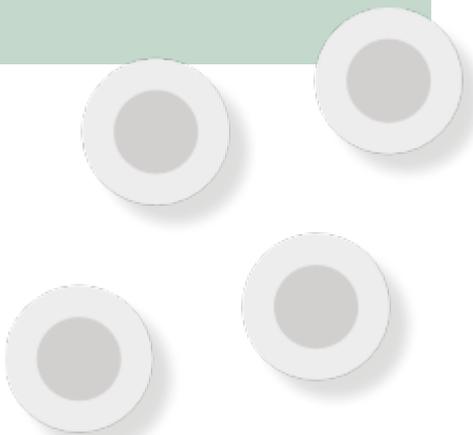
If you're covered in painful, cystic acne, it's time to see a dermatologist. Cystic acne is hormonal and more genetic-based, so the over-the-counter stuff just isn't going to cut it here. Luckily, dermatology is covered by health insurance in Japan, and you don't need a referral to start seeing one. Also, don't worry too much about your Japanese ability. Since dermatologists will be able to see your acne problems, there aren't as many questions for you to answer.

I hope these tips help you win the war on maskne!

Kaity's Recommendation:

Pop Berry Zero Spot Patch

These come in two sizes, and I've found that they are a good balance of thick enough to stay on, and not too thick that they're suuuuper noticeable.



Kaity Hamill is a third-year ALT in Niigata Prefecture. One of her hobbies is baffling dermatologists all over the world. She has struggled with acne and other skin problems (like rosacea) since good old puberty came around. That, combined with her mother's occupation as a licensed esthetician, resulted in her obsession with skincare. She is always happy to dump skincare facts and products onto her friends. Her top three skincare brands are: April Skin, Glow Recipe, and Laneige, and her favorite skincare ingredient is calendula.



FALL FLAVORS

Parade of Persimmons

Kimberly Fitzgerald (Wellness Editor)

The first time I saw a persimmon, I thought I was looking at some strange, orange variety of tomato. So, when the shop clerk showed me that she peeled them and hung them on a string to make “Japanese sweets,” I was confused to say the least. However, I soon discovered the sweet decadence of “*hoshigaki*” (dried persimmons) and the silky, honey-like flavor of a ripe persimmon. Ever since that day, I’ve set off on a mission to try to incorporate this seasonal delicacy into as many dishes as I can.

The fruits are in season from October to December, and when fully ripe, persimmons are incredibly soft and almost jelly-like on the inside. They are so soft that it is difficult for farmers to transport ripe persimmons. Because of this, persimmons are often harvested

before they are ripe. This is not a problem for non-astringent persimmons, like Fuyu, which are sweet all the time. But the varieties with high levels of soluble tannins, like Hachiya, are inedible due to their astringency if not fully ripe. However, by exposing an astringent persimmon to CO₂, the soluble tannin level is reduced and the sweet, honey-like flavor of the persimmon is brought out. While most persimmons sold in stores are either of the non-astringent variety or have already been “treated” to remove the astringency, it is always recommended to ask if a persimmon is astringent or not if receiving it as a gift.

The scientific name for persimmons, *Diospyros kaki*, means “food of the gods” (from Greek; “*dios*” meaning god and “*spyros*”



meaning food). (1) It's fitting, as these sweet little orange fruits pack as much good-for-you power as a Greek god. Persimmons are enriched with many bioactive compounds, including antioxidants, flavonoids, carotenoids, minerals, and dietary fiber. (2)

The fruit of a persimmon is also rich in vitamin A, with some varieties reaching up to 70 mg per 100 g. (2) Vitamin A is critical for your vision as it assists the retinal receptors in absorbing light. (3) In addition to vitamin A, persimmons also contain lutein, zeaxanthin, and other carotenoids which are important for eye health. (4)

Though many Japanese people consider the peel of a persimmon to be a waste, nutritionists actually recommend eating the peel as it has carotenoids and antioxidants, including vitamin C, in even higher concentrations than in the fruit itself. (2)

Even the leaves of persimmons are good for you! When brewed into tea, persimmon leaves release compounds that help reduce blood pressure. And because the leaves have an antimicrobial and anti-wrinkle effect, they have been incorporated into face creams, detergents, and even socks! (2)

But perhaps the most surprising fact is that dried persimmon snacks, like the hoshigaki that baffled me during my first few months in Japan, have been found to be effective in reducing the concentration of alcohol in the blood. (2)

So, whether you are looking for something to keep your eyes healthy, help you recover from your night out, or are just looking for a sweet treat, we recommend a true seasonal fruit, the persimmon. And for those already in love with persimmons and looking to incorporate it into other dishes, please check out the two wonderful recipes that will surely make you fall in love with the flavors of fall.

References

- (1) [Persimmon Production and Market](#)
- (2) [Chemistry and Functionality of Bioactive Compounds Present in Persimmon](#)
- (3) [Vitamin A - Health Professional Fact Sheet \(nih.gov\)](#)
- (4) [Health and Nutrition Benefits of Persimmon](#)



FRIED PORK AND PERSIMMON

Original recipe by [Kazuyo Nakajima](#) translated and adjusted by Sarah Underwood (Tokyo)

This recipe is great for an evening when you want a quick and easy meal. Persimmons add sweetness to the dish and compliment the savoriness of the pork. This dish is a great way to try cooked persimmons, especially if you've only had them raw! The recipe makes about two servings.



Ingredients:

- 150 gram pork cutlet
- Salt and pepper (to taste)
- 1 persimmon
- ½ bundle of Japanese mustard spinach (komatsuna)
- 4 cm lotus root (renkon)
- 1 teaspoon sake
- 2 teaspoons soy sauce
- A pinch of chopped red pepper (togarashi)
- 1 tablespoon sesame oil



Instructions:

1. Cut the pork cutlet into small pieces and season with salt and pepper.
2. Remove the stem of the persimmon, peel, and cut into sticks roughly the same size of the pork cutlet.
3. Cut the roots of the komatsuna, then rinse. While still semi-wet, wrap the komatsuna in plastic wrap and microwave for one to two minutes. Once soft, squeeze out water and cut into three centimeter strips.
4. Rinse the lotus root skin with water and cut into long, thin strips.
5. Heat the sesame oil in a frying pan and stir-fry the pork and lotus root, followed by persimmon and komatsuna. Saute until the pork and lotus root are cooked thoroughly.

6. Once everything has been cooked and is well coated in sesame oil, add the seasonings.

7. Finish stir-frying and serve in a bowl. Additionally, you can top it off with crushed white sesame seeds to enhance the flavor!

Sarah came back to Tokyo, Japan via JET in 2019. She loves playing piano, board games, and visiting art exhibits. She also loves trying to befriend every cat she comes across.

Photos sourced from original [Kazuho Nakajima](#) recipe



Notes: For this recipe, fully-ripe Fuyu persimmons are best, but Hachiya also work. The riper the fruit, the more flavor will come through. If you happen to have both on hand, dried/sugared hachiya slices are a great way to decorate the tops of your loaves! It's also great with American-style cream cheese frosting.

Please note that you will need an oven or a toaster oven with a convection setting on it to make this bread.

Ingredients:

- About 4 medium or 7 small persimmons
- 500 ml (2 cups) all-purpose flour
- 2.5 ml (1/2 teaspoon) salt
- 5 ml (1 teaspoon) ground cinnamon
- 2.5 ml (1/2 teaspoon) ground nutmeg
- 2.5 ml (1/2 teaspoon) ground cloves
- 5 ml (1 teaspoon) baking soda
- 2.5 ml (1/2 teaspoon) baking powder
- 180 ml (3/4 cup) unsalted butter, room temperature (plus extra for pan-prep)
- 500 ml (2 cups) white sugar
- 2 large eggs, room temperature

SPICED PERSIMMON BREAD

Emily Herrington (Yamanashi)

With autumn fully in the air, it's time for hot drinks, spicy flavors, and warm food to help us enjoy the *kouyou* season. This recipe uses Japan's favorite fall-colored produce, which can often be spotted along country roadsides. No, it's not pumpkins—but persimmons! This spiced persimmon bread recipe uses persimmons and is a great Japanese twist on a classic North American pumpkin bread.

Directions:

1. First, you'll need to make the persimmons into persimmon purée. Wash the persimmons under cold water. After drying them off, use a paring knife to carefully cut off the stem, skin, and any overly brown or bruised spots. It's okay if some skin is left, but getting most of it off is essential to a smooth purée.

2. Quarter each persimmon and put the slices into a blender. Blend until smooth. Set aside.

3. In a large bowl, combine the flour, salt, cinnamon, nutmeg, ground cloves, baking soda, and baking powder. Whisk until well combined. Set aside.

4. Preheat the oven/toaster oven to 160°C in convection mode. Generously coat the bottom and sides of the loaf pans with butter and lightly dust with flour (don't miss the sides!).

5. In another large bowl, add the butter and sugar. Whisk roughly for about one minute, until just blended. Slowly beat in each egg one at a time, whisking briskly. Once the wet batter seems light and whipped, it's ready for the purée!

6. Whisk the persimmon purée into the wet batter bowl for about one minute. Next, add the dry batter a third at a time, whisking until well-blended.

7. Pour the batter into the pan(s), leaving two to three centimeters at the top for the bread to rise.

8. For a 21x11x6 centimeter loaf pan, bake for 40-65 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean. You may need to adjust baking times depending on the size of your pans.



Note: While the top will brown nicely and look done because it's a moist dessert loaf, it may still need more time. So, be sure to use a toothpick to check that the loaf is fully cooked. Let cool for about 10-15 minutes before slicing.

Emily Herrington is a third-year JET who lives in Yamanashi prefecture. Emily has written about food, especially in educational spaces, and is interested in how our ideas about food are shaped by culture. When she's not cooking at home or hiking one of Yamanashi's "100 famous mountains" on the weekend, she is traveling to find a new craft brewery, tour a local sake distillery, or enjoy Japan's farm-to-table dining. Check her quasi-food/quasi-adventure Instagram at [@emily_eats_food](https://www.instagram.com/emily_eats_food).



COVID-19 UPDATE

States of Emergency*

The Japanese government has lifted the State of Emergency across all prefectures.

Local authorities may still impose restrictions, especially on dining and entertainment establishments. Please check with your local authority regarding specific restrictions in your region.

*All information is accurate as of November 7th. For an up-to-date list of all prefectures under States of Emergency, please refer to the [Cabinet Secretariat Office's Website](#).

The following recommendations remain in effect.

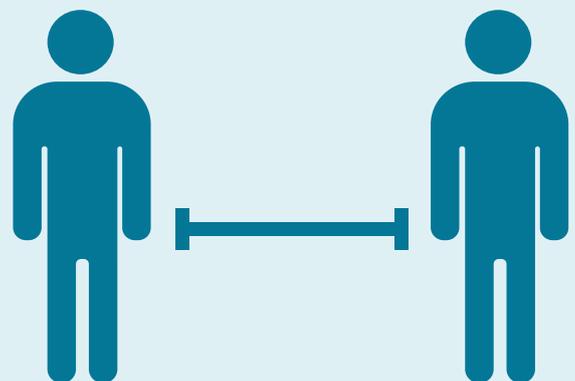
- Please avoid the “3 C’s” (closed places, crowded places, and close-contact settings).
- Wear a mask in public places.
- Keep social gatherings small and short.
- Exercise proper social distancing.
- Clean and disinfect common facilities, thoroughly wash hands, and disinfect with alcohol.

Vaccinations

The Japanese government recommends that all people over the age of 12 get vaccinated. COVID-19 vaccinations are available to everyone, including foreign residents, free of charge. After a second dose, vaccines provide significant protection against contracting COVID-19 and greatly reduce the risk of developing severe symptoms in those who do contract the virus. Getting fully vaccinated remains the best protection against severe illness, hospitalization, and death.

For up-to-date vaccination statistics, please visit the [Chief Information Officer's portal](#).

For information regarding *how to get vaccinated* or how to receive your vaccination certificate for overseas travel, please visit the [Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare's website](#).



AS OF NOVEMBER 7TH, 72% OF THE POPULATION IN JAPAN HAVE RECEIVED THEIR FIRST DOSE OF THE VACCINE, AND 68% HAVE RECEIVED BOTH DOSES.

PCR Testing

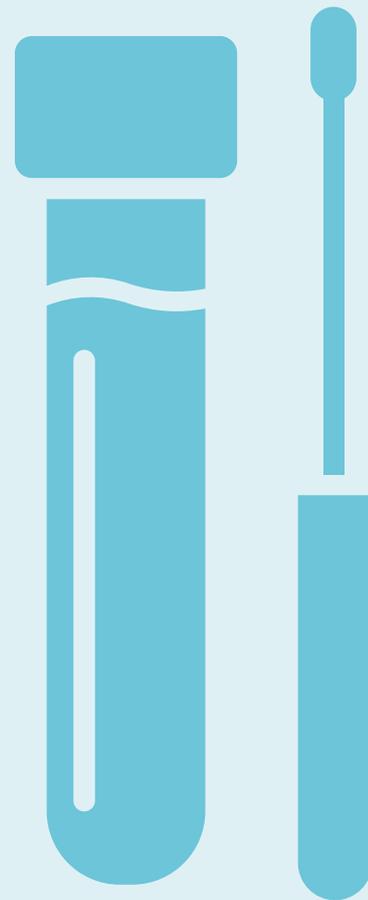
PCR tests are covered by medical insurance (as of March 6, 2021).

If you believe you may have contracted the COVID-19 virus, please contact your prefecture's COVID call center to find the testing facility nearest you. ***Do not go to the hospital.*** For information on your prefecture's call center and other COVID resources, please visit the [Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare's website](#).

Questions?

Japan Visitor Hotline: 050-3816-2787

The Japan Visitor Hotline, operated by the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), is available 24 hours a day to answer COVID-related questions or direct you to appropriate mental health resources in English, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese.



Resources

- For medically accurate, up-to-date information, check: [World Health Organization](#)
- For medical resources in your community, check the [JNTO Medical Institution Guide](#)
- For up-to-date news about COVID in Japan, check: [NHK WORLD](#)
- For information regarding international travel, check: [Immigration Services of Japan](#)

Mental Health Support

English counselling services

[TELL](#) is a not-for-profit organization that provides support and counselling services to Japan's international community through their in-person offices in Tokyo and Okinawa, as well as online services. They have professionally licensed neuropsychologists on staff to provide testing and assessment to individuals (children or adults).

TELL does not prescribe medicine, but they can refer you to psychiatrists and places to receive a prescription if needed.

TELL also runs [LifeLine](#), a free and anonymous support communication system for English speakers in Japan. For anyone wanting to talk to someone, no matter what the issue, please call the number below or see the website for more information.

[TELL Lifeline](#) (every day, 9:00 to 23:00):
03-5774-0992
(regular phone call charges apply)

[TELL Chat](#) (Friday, Saturday, Sunday, 22:30 to 2:00)

Additional support for JET Programme participants

With the aim of enhancing mental health support for JET Programme participants, CLAIR offers the JET Programme Mental Health Counselling Assistance Programme. This programme provides a partial subsidy (50%, up to 30,000 yen per year) for counselling costs not covered by health insurance.

As of April 2021, you can use this subsidy to pay for mental health services in Japan or those received online from providers in your home country. If you wish to use a service overseas, please consult with your contracting organisation supervisor for more information. If you wish to apply for the subsidy, you must do so through your contracting organisation.

CLAIR offers a toll-free telephone counselling service which does not require any advance reservation to use. The service generally operates twice per month, on the 10th and 20th (counselling days which would fall on a Sunday or holiday are instead held on the Saturday prior to that day). Operating times are from 17:30-21:00 on Weekdays and 13:00-16:30 on Saturdays.

Counselling via Telephone*

Phone number: 0120-810-803

(No advance reservation required. Calls are free of charge.)

*Limited to one call per person per day (no annual limit)

*CLAIR has prepared three telephone lines for this service; however, there may be times when the lines become congested.

In addition to the telephone service, CLAIR also offers free Web-Mail and Skype counselling.

[Web-Mail Counselling](#)

Login Password: jet2021mental

[Skype Counselling](#)

Login password: jet2021mental

VOLUNTEERING AT THE PARALYMPICS DURING COVID-19

Michelle McKee (Tokyo)

The night of Aug. 24, 2021, was hot, humid, and cloudy with an 80% chance of rain. Although not the ideal conditions to be wearing a full costume, long pants, protective mask, and helicopter hat, it was truly one of the most memorable nights of my life. It was not only my 23rd birthday but the Opening Ceremony for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games, an event that I am absolutely honored to have been a part of. As a Ceremony Cast volunteer, I greeted athletes walking into the stadium with cute, choreographed dances and hand-waving, and even received the flag from Team Morocco to carry across the stadium.

My tasks seemed to pile on top of each other. Make eye-contact with the flagbearer; make sure they see you. Receive the flag, right hand on top, left on the bottom. Don't drop the flag. Rotate the flag so it blows behind you. Look at the ground and follow the tape. But don't look down too long. Find the right number to stand on. Move the flag over to your left side, right hand on top. Set it down softly. Wait for your cue, then lift it up. My mind raced as I focused my energy entirely on not messing up on live international television. But when I lifted my flag with the rest of the cast, about an hour and 50 minutes into the ceremony, beautiful fireworks went off above my head, and all of my anxieties subsided. After eight beats of waving the flag, the music ended, the stadium went dark, and we exited the stadium.

Before this year, I never really watched the Paralympics, and I do believe part of that is due to the lack of American media coverage (lookin' at you, NBC), and a lack of general knowledge and education about disabilities. I'm appreciative that the Japanese media covered the Paralympics this year with an ability-diverse group of commentators. I loved hearing my Japanese grandparents be in awe of the talented athletes ("I can't swim that fast, and I have both arms!") that graced their screens at home. The Paralympics was a great form of entertainment and education for people like them, who spent most of their time at home during a blazing Japanese summer and ongoing pandemic.

With the COVID-19 State of Emergency and numerous scandals, there was a lot of controversy surrounding the Tokyo 2020 Games, and at times I was hesitant to speak on my involvement in it (see: a JET Programemes post on Facebook shading Olympic volunteers). As a Ceremony Cast member and not an official Field Cast volunteer, I was unfortunately ineligible for a free Tokyo 2020 COVID-19 vaccination. I took it upon myself and traveled back to the U.S. this summer so that I could be fully vaccinated and immunized before my participation in rehearsals. Although unsure at first, after seeing the strict COVID-19 protocols in place at rehearsals and during the ceremony (weekly testing, social distancing, mask mandates to name a few), I was ultimately able to feel comfortable participating in what I knew would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

TOKYO 2020



Seeing and interacting with many Paralympic athletes up close and in-person at the opening and closing ceremonies was eye-opening and incredibly special. Watching the athletes I had met at the ceremonies dominate in table tennis, track and field, wheelchair basketball, and more after years of intense training and a lifetime of (figurative) hurdles opened my eyes to the importance of holding the Paralympic Games, especially this year.

Here's to more support and awareness for people with disabilities all the time, not just for athletes, not just once every two years, and not just when you're hosting the Paralympics. Printed on our costumes was the hashtag #WeThe15, the slogan for an international campaign created to bring awareness to the 15% of the global population who live with disabilities. The campaign officially launched on the night of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics Opening Ceremony. For more information, check out [WeThe15](#).

Michelle McKee is a Tokyo JET from San Diego, California. She loves trying every Kit-Kat flavor she can find and is on a quest to discover the best Mexican food in Japan.



LANGUAGE

LANGUAGE EDITOR

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Sarah Baughn

"The banality of evil transmutes into the banality of sentimentality. The world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm." — Teju Cole

LANGUAGE DESIGNER

Phoebe Jin

"There is virtue in work and there is virtue in rest. Use both and overlook neither."

— Alan Cohen

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Day Bulger

"When captured birds grow wiser, they try to open the cage with their beaks. They don't give up because they want to fly again." — Genma Shiranui, Naruto



禁煙 火気
NO SMOKING
火気厳禁
NO OPEN FLAME
危険物品持込み厳禁
NO DANGEROUS GOODS

Teaching English and Other Life Lessons with Toshie Ogura

Toshie Ogura (Okayama) interviewed by Sarah Baughn (Ishikawa)

I was lucky enough to interview Toshie Ogura, a Japanese teacher of English from Okayama who incredibly manages to work for both the ECC Foreign Language School and a public junior high school at the same time.



Q: What made you want to be an English teacher?

A: I have no idea why I became a teacher!

In my childhood, my father worked on a tanker ship. For six months, he was not at home at all, so I could not see him. He was sailing in a tanker to many countries, and he would send a big cardboard box with a lot of gifts in it. When he went to China, he sent back a box of special ramen we could not get in Japan. Even now, I can't find that ramen. When he went to America, he sent my family a box of oranges and pink grapefruits. I screamed! When I saw oranges, it was like heaven.

Q: Is food what inspired you to study English?

A: No (laughs), I couldn't connect studying English with eating interesting foods. But eventually, my mother said to me, "If you study English hard, you'll be able to eat lots of interesting food abroad." But in my childhood, there was no English cram school nearby. But we had a large globe, so I could see the world. My parents really wanted me to be interested in other countries.

Q: In that case, how did you become interested in teaching English?

A: So about twenty years ago, before my husband and I got married, we talked about how I wanted to be a stay-at-home mother. But I also wanted to work, to do something to earn money. So I thought, "Oh, what can I do?" I saw a newspaper ad for ECC saying, "If you like English and kids, then please be a teacher with us." I thought, "Okay, why not?" So as soon as I saw the ad, I made a call to the ECC center.





**“Ah, this is it.
This is the place
I want to be.”**



Q: What did you think about ECC?

A: At that time, there was a distance between teachers and students. People thought that teachers should discipline their kids.

I didn't want to be that kind of teacher. But at ECC, they have a theory that “You should accept your kids and embrace them into your heart.” I had never experienced such an idea. So I felt like, “Ah, this is it. This is the place I want to be.” It was such a warm feeling in my heart. At that time, I couldn't speak English like I can now, fairly fluently, because English was just a school subject and not a tool of communication. So when someone tried to talk in English, it felt like an extension of the English listening tests. “Oh, I have to answer this properly, and I have to be grammatically perfect.”

Q: Do you think many Japanese people feel that way about learning English?

A: Yeah, I think so. To me, English felt like a school subject and test, so a good score or bad score was all that mattered. But really, it's for communication.

Q: What are the requirements to teach for ECC?

A: I'm not sure exactly, but I think Eiken Grade 2 is required. Also, ECC has a great training system for teachers for one year. The first lesson was how to smile and greet friendly.

Q: Why was that required?

A: At that time, I couldn't smile very well. So I trained with chopsticks to spread my smile.

Q: How did you do that exactly?

A: (laughs) Hmm, it's difficult to describe, but I would have to match a certain width measured with chopsticks.



Q: (laughs) That does sound difficult. What else did you learn?

A: The next thing was how to encourage students with words and with attitude. It was totally the opposite of what I thought, which was that teachers had to be very strict. ECC encouraged us to be very friendly.

We do a lot of songs and dance. ECC has a lot of useful chants. We always sing at the beginning of lessons. That's why even small kids can say useful expressions because they know and learn them from songs.

ECC's theory is that the more we play in English, the more we learn in English.

They love to learn English at ECC, so after we had a break last week, the students came into the classroom, and they were so happy to be there. At public school it's totally different right?

Q: When did you start teaching at public school?

A: After my child entered elementary school, I started to work at public school, too. And it was totally opposite from ECC. From the beginning of my teaching, I was surrounded by students who were eager to study English. But at school, I was so surprised because many students don't want to study!

In my childhood, I was not allowed to go to junior high school myself. I had been hospitalized for three years with kidney disease, which is why I gave up on being a school teacher because they have to do everything. They have to be physically and mentally fit. That's why I wanted to stay home.





Q: How do you balance your everyday life between the two schools?

A: I get up at 5:30. I always go outside to my garden to take care of my roses and tree peonies in the morning. After that, I make breakfast and make videos correcting my students' essays. At 7, I prepare to go to school. I work at the school until lunch. After I finish my classes, I manage to prepare for the next classes at school, then I leave to eat lunch at home. Then I take a short nap, so then I make dinner and watch dramas I recorded until ECC lessons start at 3:20. ECC lessons end at 9:30 PM. Then I spend time with my family. After the long day, my husband and I do yoga together.

I'm very satisfied with my life. I don't want to be a regular teacher. Being a part-time teacher is enough for me.

Q: You mentioned homestays abroad. Where have you been?

A: The last 12 years, I've been to one country every year: Australia, New Zealand, Canada, US, the UK. I go with my students to the country that I want to go. On the way home, I will think "Ok! Next year I will go to Hawaii."

Every homestay, we stay for more than two weeks. During the homestay program, in the morning, students take lessons. In the afternoon, we do a lot of activities. For example, we went to London city to ride the London Eye and the British Museum, and then we went to a local supermarket, Sainsbury's. The vegetables are always different. I got excited to see rhubarb because I didn't know what to do with it. So I asked my host mother what to do with this vegetable. She showed me how to make pie with it, and so, we made rhubarb pie together.

I always buy food for my students in ECC, like my father did for me when I was a child. I put the snacks into their palms, count to three, and then make them eat it. They've tried vegemite, marmite, eucalyptus candies, and licorice.





Q: Did they like those?

A: No, they hated them!

Q: Were there any foods that they liked?

A: In the UK, I once got an entire suitcase full of meringue nests, and they got crushed! But they still tasted great. The kids loved those.

Q: You mentioned not being very interested in English before, but then you traveled to many countries with English—what changed your mind about English?

A: My idea of English was completely changed by an ALT teacher. Sanyu was from Jamaica. When I met and worked with her, my basic idea was completely changed. In my mind, English should be fast, like how Japanese English teachers spoke. Her English was much slower, and it was so warm and kind. She was a human and not an English machine. She was not a CD player. She always told jokes. It was totally new to me. When she tried to encourage me with a smile, it was so surprising. She was the first foreign person I wanted to make friends with, so I thought I should learn more English to keep the conversation going and to be friends with her. She became a good inspiration for me. We made friends with each other. We talk with each other on Facebook. Sanyu was so beautiful and so warm.

Q: So meeting other ALTs encouraged your English?

A: Well from those ALTs, I wanted to make more friends with English. So every time I did a homestay abroad, I made friends everywhere. I also want ALTs to feel comfortable and welcome in Japan, because everyone abroad was so kind and warm to me and my students. So I always want my foreign friends to feel the same warm feeling, like they belong to us, they belong to Japan. I try to help them in Japanese life, and I want them to experience Japanese culture.

Q: Do you have any other advice for ALTs?

A: I don't have advice for ALTs. I just want to appreciate them. I'd like ALT teachers to try to experience Japanese culture. I want them to talk more about what they experience in Japanese life more so that my students will become proud of being in Japan.

For example, if the ALT says, "Hey, yesterday we went to a Japanese autumn festival and carried portable shrines. It was so cool!" Some students think that participating in Japanese traditional culture is so boring, playing games is so much cooler. I'd like them to have new eyes to see Japan and see the world from a different perspective. So they will be proud of Japan. So many young people are not so proud of their country.

They are what I was. In my childhood, I didn't like Japan. It was so boring. Everyone's the same and does the same things and looks the same and says the same things. Japanese people don't talk much about themselves. They have to be humble about themselves and not express themselves, especially women. We're not allowed to express ourselves so flashily. I am a person who wears bright colors. In our staffroom, every teacher's clothes are quiet colors. But I like bright colors, so I am the only person who wears yellow. Twenty years ago, I thought Japan was so dark and boring, grey, and square. But after I experienced Japan with foreign people, my idea was completely changed. From the different perspective of foreign people, I could see Japan with different eyes, from different aspects and perspectives. Everything became new to me.

For example, tea ceremony was not so exciting for me before I met another ALT, William. William wanted to experience tea ceremony with me. So, I brought him to a tea ceremony lesson with me. My tea ceremony group welcomed William while I became a translator for him to learn tea ceremony. Then I felt something strange or something weird in my mind. Suddenly, the ceremony looked interesting. The tea ceremony master tried to explain to him, but it was so brand new to him, so alien. They tried to explain more details to him I never knew about before. And through that, I learned more about tea ceremony. After learning a different view, I began to be proud of being Japanese and being in Japan.

Now I can understand both worlds, Japanese and Western, and so I can see new worlds between them. I can get the good points of each world, which makes my life brighter. To enjoy Japan more, I hold workshops such as yukata workshops, calligraphy lessons at a temple, and *matcha* tea parties in my garden.

orange vector credit: [vecteezy.com](https://www.vecteezy.com)

Toshie Ogura enjoys working for a public school in the morning and for ECC in the evening. She loves traveling the world with her students. In her free time, she grows roses and tree peonies and enjoys tea ceremonies, kimonos, and calligraphy. She also loves baking Tarte Tatin. It's well worth taking a bite!

Sarah Baughn is a former Ishikawa JET and the Language Section Editor for CONNECT. She spends perhaps too much time studying Japanese and language learning strategies, but also enjoys collecting goshuin, playing video games, and learning koto.

イクラはいくら？

How much is salmon roe?

Puns in Japanese are usually pretty simple and based on the humor of words with the same sounds and spelling. Learning a few puns (or *ダジャレ* (*dajare*)) in Japanese is a fantastic way to befriend your local older men, as *dajare* are considered *親父ギャグ* (*oyaji gyagu*), meaning “old man jokes.” In other words, a dad joke.

Vocabulary

Labor Thanksgiving Day (the national holiday on the 23rd)	勤労感謝の日 きんろうかんしゃのひ	kinroukansha no hi
Thanksgiving (the American and Canadian version)	感謝祭 かんしゃさい	kanshasai
turkey	七面鳥 しちめんちょう	shichimenchou
autumn leaves	紅葉 こうよう	kouyou
“autumn leaf hunting”	紅葉狩り もみじがり	Momijigari
Japanese chestnut	栗 くり	kuri
persimmon	柿 かき	kaki
Japanese sweet potatoes	さつま芋 さつまいも	satsumaimo
scarf	スカーフ	sukaafu
<i>kotatsu</i> or “a table over an electric heater” (Yes, you should pull out your <i>kotatsu</i> in November—it counts)	炬燵 こたつ	kotatsu

TRAVEL AND COMMUNITY

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"Every man desires to live long, but no man wishes to be old." — Jonathan Swift, Gulliver's Travels

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"You miss 100% of the shots you don't take — Wayne Gretzky — Michael Scott" — The Office

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"The worst distance between two people is misunderstanding." — Neetesh Dixit

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Dianne Yett

"Monday for me is like waking up and stumbling very quickly down a flight of stairs only to land perfectly on your feet at the bottom and wondering how in the actual hell you managed that." — Self

TY



IN SEARCH OF SPIRITS

EXPLORING HAUNTED NIIGATA

“Lupin” Van de Voorde (Niigata)

Wandering through an overgrown garden path, I suddenly heard a loud thud of something heavy, like a body, impacting the ground. My body froze up as I waited, holding my breath for the next sound. Then—approaching footsteps. I was not alone. I ran—across the entire expanse of the abandoned theme park. Scrambling over loose rocks, I made it to the treeline and fumbled for my flashlight as the canopy blocked the last light of the setting sun. I could hear only the pounding of my feet against the ground, the dry heaving of my breath against my rib-cage, the strong pounding of my heartbeat.

Now, I bet you're wondering how I got here.

Halloween has always been my favorite time of year. Building up to it, I asked my students for advice about *yabai* spots, or haunts, that I could explore in my area.

For homework, I split them into groups and asked them to tell me about scary local places. I thought it would be a really fun way to engage with them and motivate them to speak to me. Also, I wanted the rush of exploring something a bit taboo.

As I listened to their presentations, one location in particular stood out to me: the “white house.” The students told tales of a ghost haunting an old house, and different versions of the story began to emerge: in some versions, a girl set fire to the house her parents imprisoned her in and ran away. In another version, the housekeeper died. In others, there is more death, by more violent means. Although the stories were different, the hushed tone of fear and excitement in my students’ voices was the same. Whatever the reason, this was a blighted place. I knew I had to check it out.





THE WHITE HOUSE

Soon, I was driving along an abandoned beachfront area, past boarded-up shops, inns, restaurants, and vacation homes—the last derelict remains of a little community. The dirt road took me over a hill, past a crumbling wall covered in colorful graffiti, to a narrow tunnel, not passable by car. I got out and walked in. The place was eerily quiet and considerably overgrown. Strangely, there were recent tire marks which seemed to lead to the tunnel . . . that a car shouldn't have been able to fit through. A wooden sign post near the tree showed the family name. And to the right, the roped-off home waited.

I peered in the windows. Shoes were still laid out as if the family either never left, or had left in a hurry. The inside was condemned, covered in dust, and generally just had a creepy feeling to it, especially since I knew the stories behind the place.

Further up the hill was a looming structure marred by obvious burn marks. As I took pictures and made my way up, I couldn't resist feeling excited and even delighted at such a find. Although ruined, the inside walls were painted with strange graffiti eyes that seemed to look at me. Burnt evidence of fireworks from other visitors scattered the floor. The "white house" had bars over the windows, and a metal shutter for a door. I felt driven to satiate my curiosity and my longing for adventure, and so I crept inside to take more pictures. As I later told my students of my experiences, and showed them the photos, there was one particular image that caught their attention. Reflected in a dusty window was a distorted beam of light. *"That's her! That's the girl!"* my students shouted. *"You can see her! She's there!" "She's there!" "She's there!"*

NANAMEN DAITENJO IWAYAL

On Route 402 near the neighborhood of Kadudahama, by Kuda Beach and south of the Myokoji Temple, I discovered a cave very near to the “white house” site. I had gone to get a shrine stamp in the temple nearby. The neighborhood was quaint enough, with narrow side streets. After visiting the temple, I saw a site nearby on my maps and asked a staff member about it. They excitedly told me about the cave’s story.

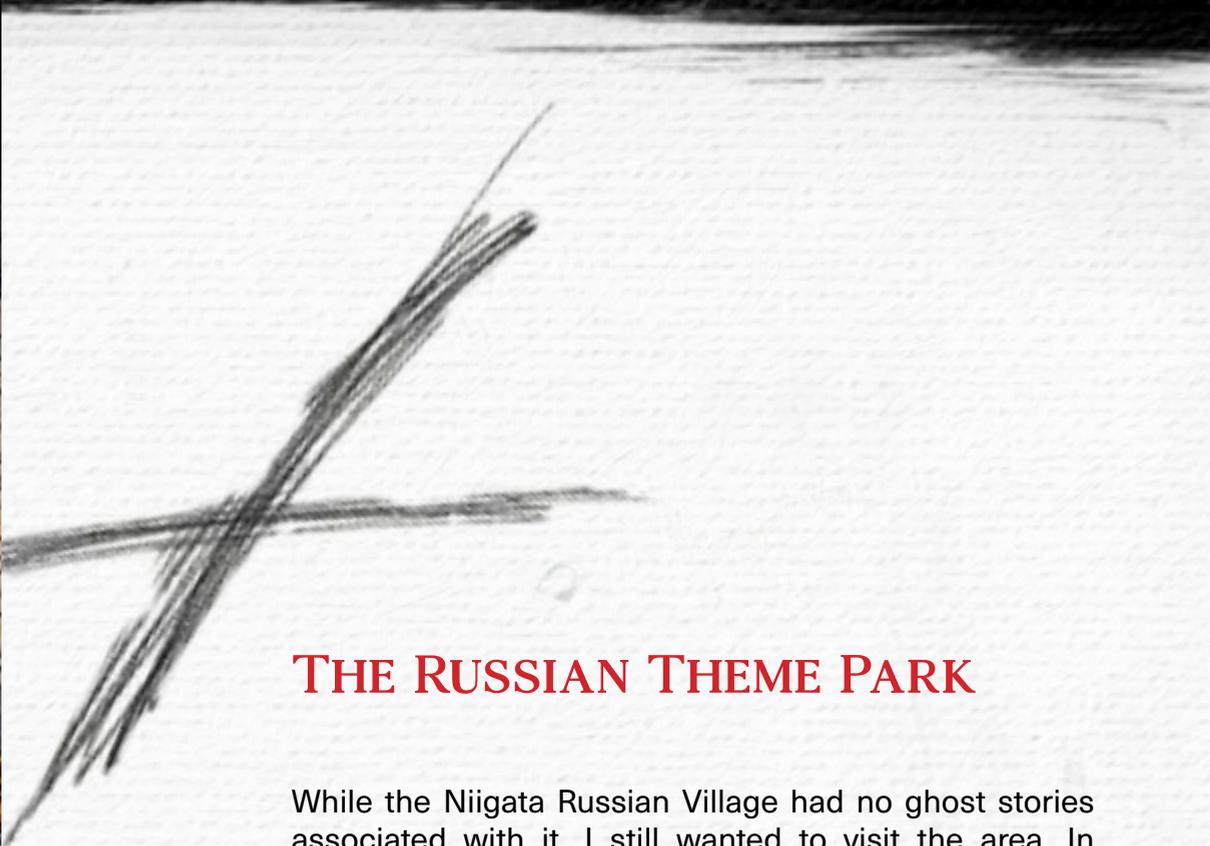
Long ago, it was said that the village was plagued by malevolent spirits, snakes, and a *kappa*, who would drag children to their deaths in the local river. One night, in a great storm, a monk named Nichiren Shonin escaped from nearby Sado Island and washed ashore. The villagers took him in and protected him from the authorities, and as thanks, the monk agreed to set himself against the evil spirits haunting the village. After a great struggle, the wise monk banished the creatures and sealed them inside this cave.

The pathway to the cave was just a dirt road with a tree growing in the middle of it, so I got out of my car and walked. The grey cave and mountain face were rocky and overgrown. There were red and white banners and a standing plaque to the right of the mouth of the cave. To the left was the statue of the monk. The cave was small, but still looked like a hungry mouth. Walking inside, I saw a curious pile of smooth rocks.

If you visit, do not disturb the pile of rocks there! Such an act is disrespectful and is said to bring upon a curse upon the offender.

The town also kept a relic nearby of the creature: a mummified, webbed “hand of the kappa” which was on display at the time. It’s small, smaller than a child’s hand, dark, and mummy-like. Local children still avoid the cave, for fear that the kappa’s angry spirit will catch and drown them.





THE RUSSIAN THEME PARK

While the Niigata Russian Village had no ghost stories associated with it, I still wanted to visit the area. In the '90's, Niigata was big on car exportation to Russia and as such had a significant presence of the Russian mob, apparently. The prefecture of Niigata insists that the Russian-themed amusement park was made to encourage tourism and boost international relations with Russia, but some locals told me money from the mob funded the park. The impression I got was that the *Yakuza*, the Japanese mafia, didn't take kindly to their power in the region, and so they bullied the foreign companies out of the trade industry there.

I arrived in the mid-to-late afternoon. Plenty of time to explore and get a few pictures to show my students before nightfall! I parked my car under the old sign for the theme park, got out, and walked up to the old metal fence plastered with notices from the prefecture. "Condemned" "Stay Out" "Risk of Death" and the like. Perfect. I had to skirt the gate, but it was simple to walk around, since the site was surrounded by forest. I walked down a dirt road until I finally came to the old "Niigata Russian Village." Among various unidentifiable ruins was a Russian church, an onsen with a collapsed roof, and a hotel far in the distance.

I kept my eyes and ears open just in case I had to get out of there quickly, and I took care to be quiet as I walked. The onsen was fascinating to see. I noticed some Japanese graffiti that translated to "*body under (here).*" I really enjoyed poking about the church, seeing the cracked art, broken statues, and overall sense of decay. While I'm sure it originally had an air of reverence to the place, it just felt creepy to me.

Near the church was the remaining half of the two-storied hotel. The grounds were extensive, and I took my time, enjoying myself. By the time I got to the rooms at the hotel, the sun was going down, and I got a stronger sense of foreboding, seeing the collapsed roof of the place. Not willing to get caught under some rubble, I continued my examination of the park.

Now, I am not a superstitious man, but as I explored the spacious ruins of the theme park, I came to what appeared to be the welcome area, with branching paths, a little flower garden . . . when suddenly I heard a noise, like a body falling a significant distance. Then, footsteps in my direction. There are few things in this world I feel comfortable tempting but neither Japanese ghosts, nor gangsters, are among them.

Those stories never end well. So I booked it back to my car, cradling my camera in my hands as I ran faster than I've ever run in my life. It wouldn't be a ghost hunt without freaking myself out!

Ultimately, what I learned from these spooky adventures is to say yes to whatever weird opportunities come your way in Japan! You never know who you'll meet! You too can explore creepy Japan. There are "yabai" spots all over the country, so if you're interested in ghost hunting, weird folklore, or urban exploration, be on the lookout for spots in your prefecture. Just be sure to take necessary precautions and reconsider visiting condemned areas.

Lupin lived in Japan for six years, in Toyama, Niigata, Nagano, and Okayama. His favorite hobby is Shorinji Kempo. He now lives in Virginia and works for an airline.



FOR MORE INFORMATION ON
THE LOCATIONS:

[The White House \(Japanese\)](#)
[Nanamen Daitenjyo Iwayal \(Video\)](#)
[Atlas Obscura—Russian Theme Park](#)

TO START YOUR GHOST
HUNTING JOURNEY, SEE
THE FOLLOWING LINKS
TO DISCOVER MORE
HAUNTED SPOTS:

[15 Nightmare inducing places](#)
[The nine most haunted places in Japan](#)





NATIONAL M

Local Color Pale

With the typhoon season behind us, no autumnal foliage. This month, several of a piece of their area, inviting you to hope local color displays of nature. Grab your sure way to enjoy these seven



MOMIJIGARI

ettes to Discover

ow is the time to enjoy a seasonal treat:
ollaborators joined forces to showcase
efully visit in the near future to enjoy the
r scarf and bring your to-go #PSL for a
gorgeous color hunting spots.



AUTUMN ON VOLCANIC AOMORI PEAKS

Nick Wagner (Aomori)

A while back, my principal and I took our chances with a 40% rain forecast on our hike of Mount Otake; we lost those odds. Fortunately, we had spare clothes and a nearby emergency ski shack where we could take shelter. Turns out, the fun wasn't entirely spoiled.

THE SPOT

The Hakkoda mountains in Aomori boast beautiful colorful hues this time of year. The volcanic complex in Northern Honshu is one of the 100 Famous Japanese Mountains, Mount Otake being its highest peak.

BEST COLOR FORECAST

In the area, the leaves fall fairly quickly after they change color, so when we went on Sept. 23, it was the perfect time to see the leaves at higher elevations. The trees at the base generally change color in the beginning of October, which is widely considered the best time to go.





UNIQUE POINT

The clouds huddled near the peak when we reached the top, so we didn't get the usual view. Not being able to see the scenery from the top might disappoint the typical hiker, however, at Hakkoda, the best and most unique portion of the hike is the wetland area after the mountain descent. Fortunately, the weather cleared up so we could enjoy the vivid foliage.

Wooden planks stretch throughout the wetlands making for an easy trek. The trek is broken up with comfortable intervals of rest areas where you can recharge and look at the scenery around you. There are many different hiking trails you can take, one being the ropeway trail. If you do this, you can have a lighter hike and still enjoy the view.

SMALL DETOUR

If you take the longer hiking trail, you will finish your hike at the entrance of *Sukayu onsen*. Established in 1694, it is one of the 700 remaining hot springs with a mixed bath option. Whether you've come for a day trip and want to stay the night, or you want to relax before your next destination, you'll definitely want to check out this onsen.

The Hakkoda mountains are also popular in winter for skiing and snowboarding. Despite the extreme snowfall in Aomori, the roads are still accessible in winter, so if you don't make it for the fall leaves, make sure to come in the winter!



Nick Wagner is an elementary school Assistant Language Teacher living in Hirosaki that loves soba, fiercely dislikes natto, and spends his weekends hiking.





FALL IN FUKUI

Meg Luedtke (Fukui)

Fukui, like all other prefectures with temples and shrines, be corners or secluded mountain architecture nerd interested in have a fairly long laundry list of p and shrines around Japan. Luck time favorites to visit, especially my backyard (metaphorically spe

THE SPOT

Eiheiji Temple, also referred "Eternal Peace," is nestled in the Fukui City. It was founded in 1244 head temples of Soto Zen. The te to around 100 monks living and ("single-minded-sitting") on its g year, many locals and visitors enjoy the lush foliage, crystal some meditation of their own. forested mountainside makes experiencing fall in all its vibrant

BEST COLOR FOREC

The leaves at Eiheiji may start to October, but the leaves will rea and peak around mid to late Nov

UNIQUE POINT

Eiheiji Temple has several halls t The most famous one being Z monks meditate in every day. T paintings, done by 144 diffe decorating its ceiling. Most o flowers or birds. However, if visit they'll notice that there are paintings of koi fish, two painting Lions), and one painting of a squ can spot all five of these unic become lucky!

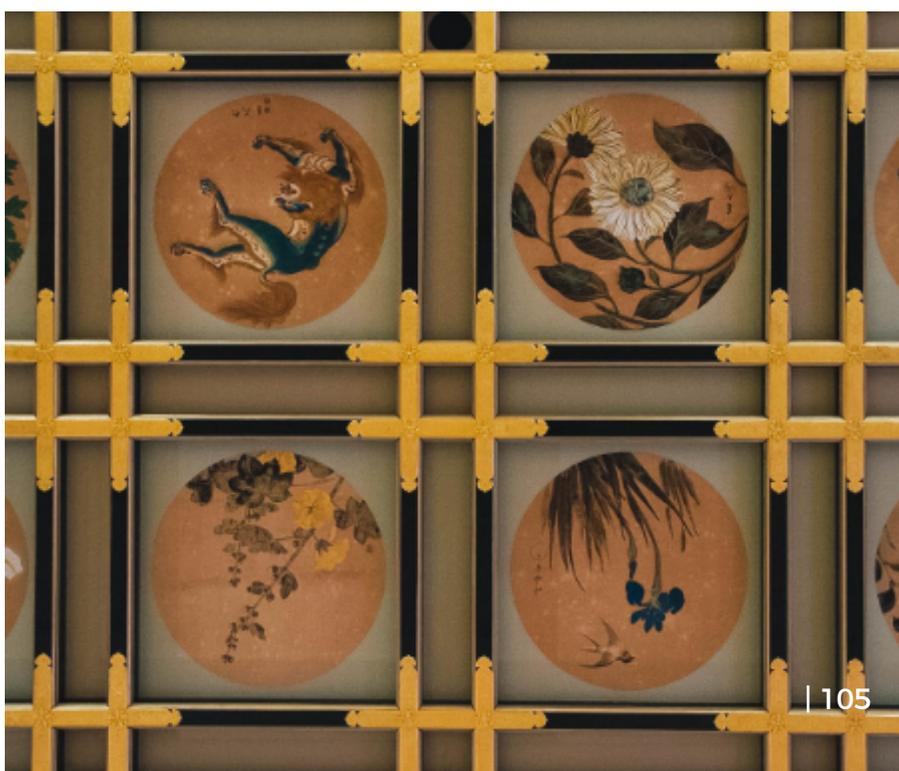
in Japan, is overflowing
that on bustling city
trails. As a historical
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ily for me, one of my all-
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EAST

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that visitors can explore.
Zazen Hall, a room the
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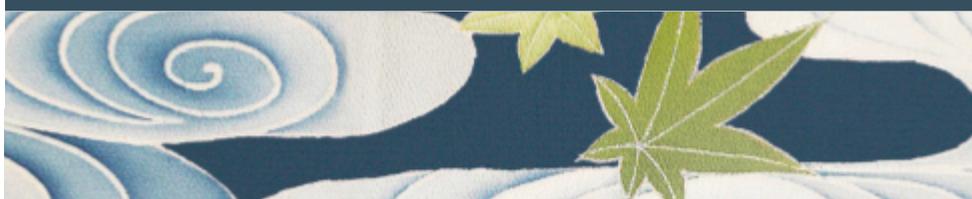


SMALL DETOUR

About thirty minutes away from Eihei-ji Temple, you can find *Heisen-ji Temple*, *Echizen Daibutsu*, and the Fukui Dinosaur Museum, all within a 15-minute proximity of each other. Heisen-ji is a beautiful moss-covered temple tucked away in the forest. Echizen Daibutsu is home to the tallest sitting Buddha in Japan. The statue sits at 17 meters tall and is accompanied by over 1,000 smaller stone statues adorning the walls of the hall. The Fukui Dinosaur Museum is a three-story dome where visitors can walk around and see fossils, shiny rocks, and other relics of the past!

If you want to get a preview of the temple, you can check out this video of Eihei-ji I made [here!](#)

Meg is a third-year JET enjoying the small town life in Fukui. She is frequently found out exploring and taking photos but also enjoys relaxing at home, playing games, or watching TV.



SOUTH GUNMA

Cinthia Gomez (Gunma)

THE SPOT

Last autumn I had the pleasure of visiting Fujioka, during their autumn illumination festival. The location is a bit far away up in the mountains, but it's worth the drive. The location has a parking lot with a shuttle bus that can walk to the park. The drive is sometimes quite steep and dark, but the trek from the parking lot is short and the entry fee 3,000% worth it.

BEST COLOR FORECAST

In the springtime, Sakurayama Park is a beautiful sight in trees. In the fall, the full foliage becomes enveloped in warm tones. Many lights are set upward and the mountain in bright hues. I visited in the evening, and the colors were at their best. The lighting on the leaves contrasting with the dark sky gave the perfect autumn aesthetic.



PEAK COLORS

of visiting *Sakurayama Park*, in
minations festivities. It's tucked
s easy to find with Google Maps.
th many spaces from where you
ive there is long, curvy, and
k at night, but once arrived, the
t and easy, making the 500 yen

FAST

ark is a simple hilly park covered
e takes effect, and the mountain
nes. When the sun goes down,
gainst the trees, igniting the
in late November on a Saturday
a lovely peak orange. The warm
g with the pitch-black evening
thetic.

UNIQUE POINT

There is a lake in the park that beautifully reflects all the reds, yellows, and oranges. There is also a small but very lovely waterfall. It was a fairly small, simple festival, meaning there were no *yakisoba* stalls or music, but the lowered hype made it more quiet and enjoyable. There were, however, a few vendors right outside of the park selling traditional Japanese snacks and fruit. The main activity involved walking around the small hills and taking in all the sights.

MEMORIES

I very much enjoyed getting bundled up in autumn clothing and strolling around under the leaves with my friends. We took a lot of great photos, and we got warm soba afterward. It's nice to have a safe outdoor activity so close to home.

Cinthia is an ALT from Southern California living in Kiryu, Gunma. She likes piña colodas and getting caught in the rain.





SMALL TOWN, BIG COLORS

Samantha Marks (Ishikawa)

THE SPOT

[Shirakawa-go](#) is one of those places that makes it on everyone's "must visit" list for fall colors in Japan, and for good reason. Located in Gifu Prefecture, Shirakawa-go is one of three small villages that became a joint [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#) less than 30 years ago in 1995. Tucked away in a quiet valley, the small village features traditional, yet unique, *Gassho* style houses with their unmistakable A-frame thatched roofs.

BEST COLOR FORECAST

Set amongst rice fields, Shirakawa-go becomes absolutely picturesque when bursts of oranges, reds, and yellows set the houses in silhouette or reflect beautifully in the waterways. Even the mountains surrounding the valley, dotted with evergreens, give the town a beautiful golden-red backdrop. While the trees do begin to change in mid- to late-October, peak *koyo*-viewing season is in November.

UNIQUE POINT

Depending on when you visit in November, you can see the fall illuminations, or you might catch [local cultural events](#) like the annual firehose practice (in preparation for any fires that may occur during the winter months) or when the houses don their winter blankets (an extra layer of straw or rice stems) to protect them from the coming snow.

SMALL DETOUR

I visited Shirakawa-go almost three years ago now, and driving out to the small village was an experience I won't easily forget. If you have the chance, I highly recommend driving from Southern Ishikawa to Shirakawa-go via the Hakusan Shirakawa-go White Road. It's a toll road that follows winding mountain roads, and the views will not disappoint. You'll see gorgeous, clear rivers cut through the red and orange speckled mountains, with views of bridges and waterfalls that many people stop to take pictures of. Check the [website](#) to make sure the road is open before you plan your trip.

And, just for fun, if you're a fan of horror or murder mysteries, there's an anime set in a town based on Shirakawa-go. It's called [Higurashi no Naku Noro ni](#) (When They Cry), and you can even find drawings of the characters on *ema* at local shrines!

Samantha Marks is a fourth-year ALT enjoying the four seasons of Japan in Southern Ishikawa.





NAGATORO—HUES ALONG THE RIVER

Jessica Craven (Saitama)

When I go for a stroll in autumn, I especially like to walk around traditional Japanese districts. As the humidity of summer is replaced with a slightly chilly breeze, time seems to slow down a bit, and I like to casually ponder about the culture and history of the area I am visiting. What was it like walking down the same street 200 years ago? How has the culture of the area changed, and what does it say about the people who live there now? When I'm in a district with historical architecture, I tend to think about such things.

THE SPOT

Nagatoro is a town in the mountains of Western Saitama Prefecture that is very much steeped in the past and provides a terrific atmosphere for an autumn stroll. Although the town is close to Tokyo, it contains a bounty of nature that remains relatively untouched.

BEST COLOR FORECAST

Every year throughout the month of November, a [fall foliage festival](#) is held. Usually, you can enjoy the beautiful fall illuminations at night time as well as the striking natural scenery during the day.





UNIQUE POINT

I particularly enjoyed watching the traditional wooden boats float down Nagatoro River. The colorful autumn foliage contrasts beautifully with the blue-green river and white cliffs of the Nagatoro Iwatadami rocks. The leaves seem to change colors more slowly in recent years due to the lingering hot weather, but I think the cool river water and the faintly-colored early autumn leaves together create a perfect view of the final breaths of summer giving way to the beginning of fall.

*Jessica is a fifth-year American JET living in Saitama and the Art Section Editor for **CONNECT**. On weekends she enjoys hiking in remote areas of Saitama or taking day-trips to Tokyo. When not adventuring, she can be found reading or creating her own artwork, which can be seen on her Instagram [@jessica_craven_art](https://www.instagram.com/jessica_craven_art).*

THE COLORS OF WEST TOKYO

Carol Kavanagh (Tokyo)

THE SPOT

Showa Kinen Park, in Tachikawa, West of Tokyo, is truly a sight to behold once fall trotters along. This large park acts as a haven for nature lovers who want some tranquility away from busy Tokyo life. I've visited this park at various times of the year, but my favorite is during fall.

BEST COLOR FORECAST

The park features an *Autumn Night Walk*, a paid event happening in November, where lights are strategically placed throughout the park around the colorful trees, illuminating their red and yellow hues, creating an autumn wonderland. It's a magical experience I highly recommend.

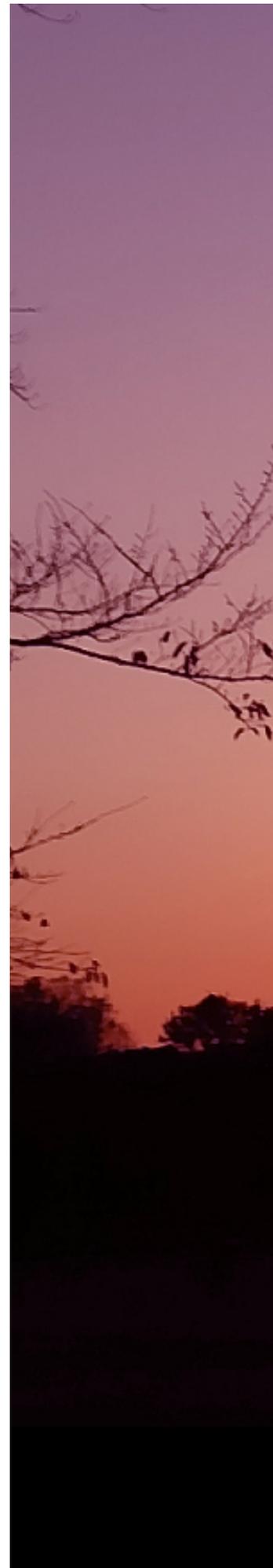
UNIQUE POINT

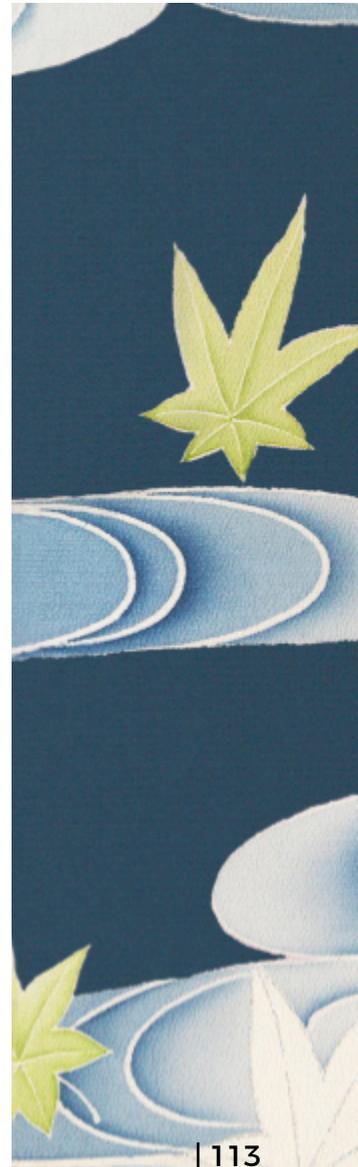
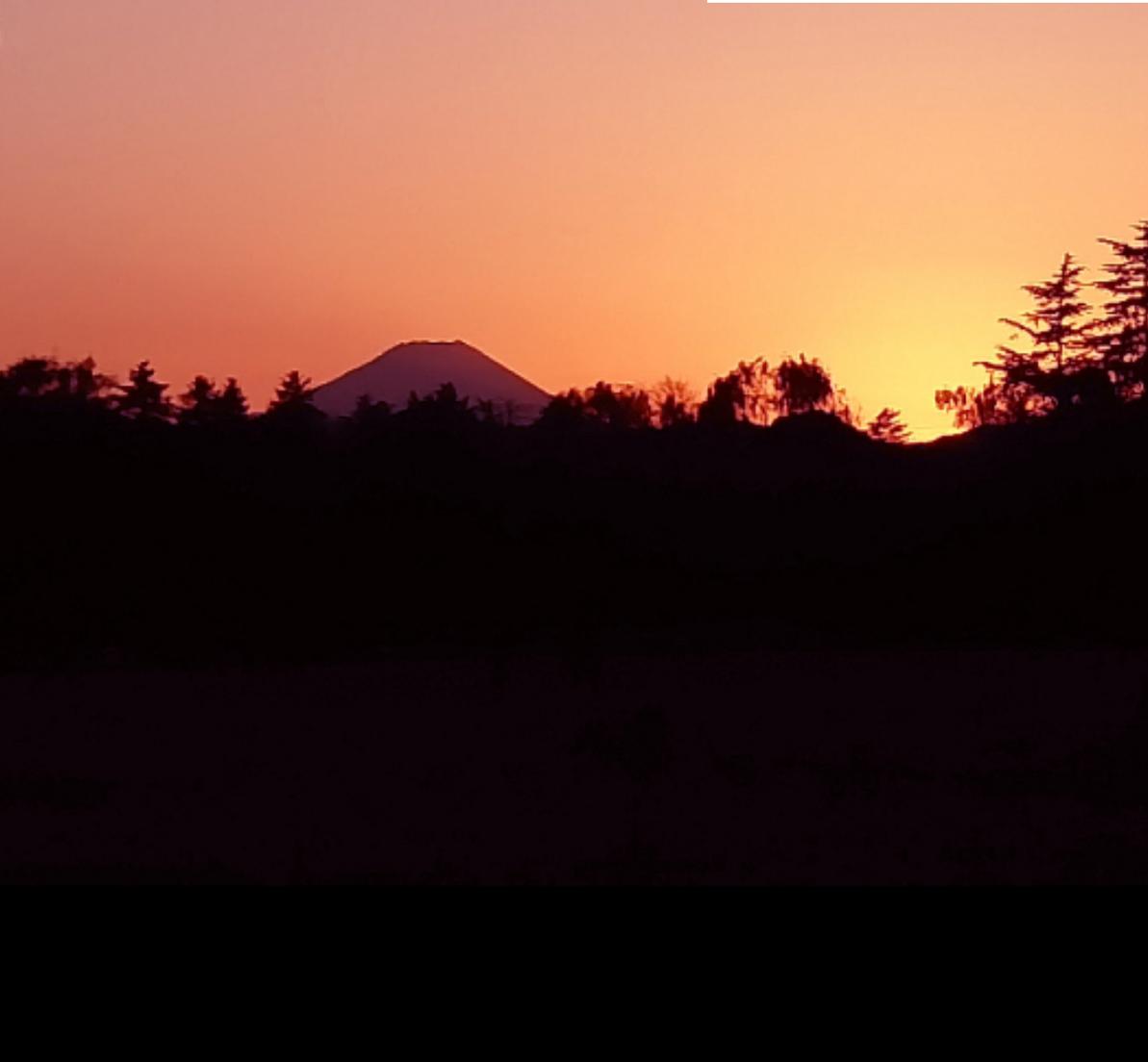
There is one particularly picture-perfect pathway, aptly named Ginkgo Tree Avenue, where 98 ginkgo trees tower over visitors walking down it, their shoes becoming enveloped in crusty, golden leaves. It's the best place to take some stunning fall photos. The path is filled with people strolling by and cyclists testing out the bikes you can rent all day for about 530 yen. For those looking to escape the crowds and save a few yen, the same Ginkgo trees usually change to their beautiful yellow color around late October, allowing everyone to visit and enjoy the fall atmosphere. For camera enthusiasts, there is also a traditional Japanese garden with vibrant red maple trees that is a haven for photographers.

MEMORIES

While I was visiting with my friend, we came across a photographer taking pictures of a beautiful woman posing in a traditional kimono under the maple trees. I managed to take some sneaky shots of her without them realizing. If you are even luckier, on a crisp, cool day, while eating some snacks from the stalls in the picnic area, you might see the glorious Mount Fuji. I managed to hop up onto a bench and take some marvelous photos with the sun setting behind it. This park really is the perfect park for the perfect fall day.

Carol is a fourth-year JET who is obsessed with silly horror movies, cats, coffee and swims to stay sane.







MOMIJI CORRIDOR AT THE FOOT OF MOUNT FUJI

McK Komai (Yamanashi)

THE SPOT

The *Fuji Kawaguchiko Autumn Leaves Festival* is my favorite way to celebrate the fall foliage season where I live in Yamanashi Prefecture. The festival takes place at the base of Mount Fuji in a small town called “Kawaguchiko-machi.”

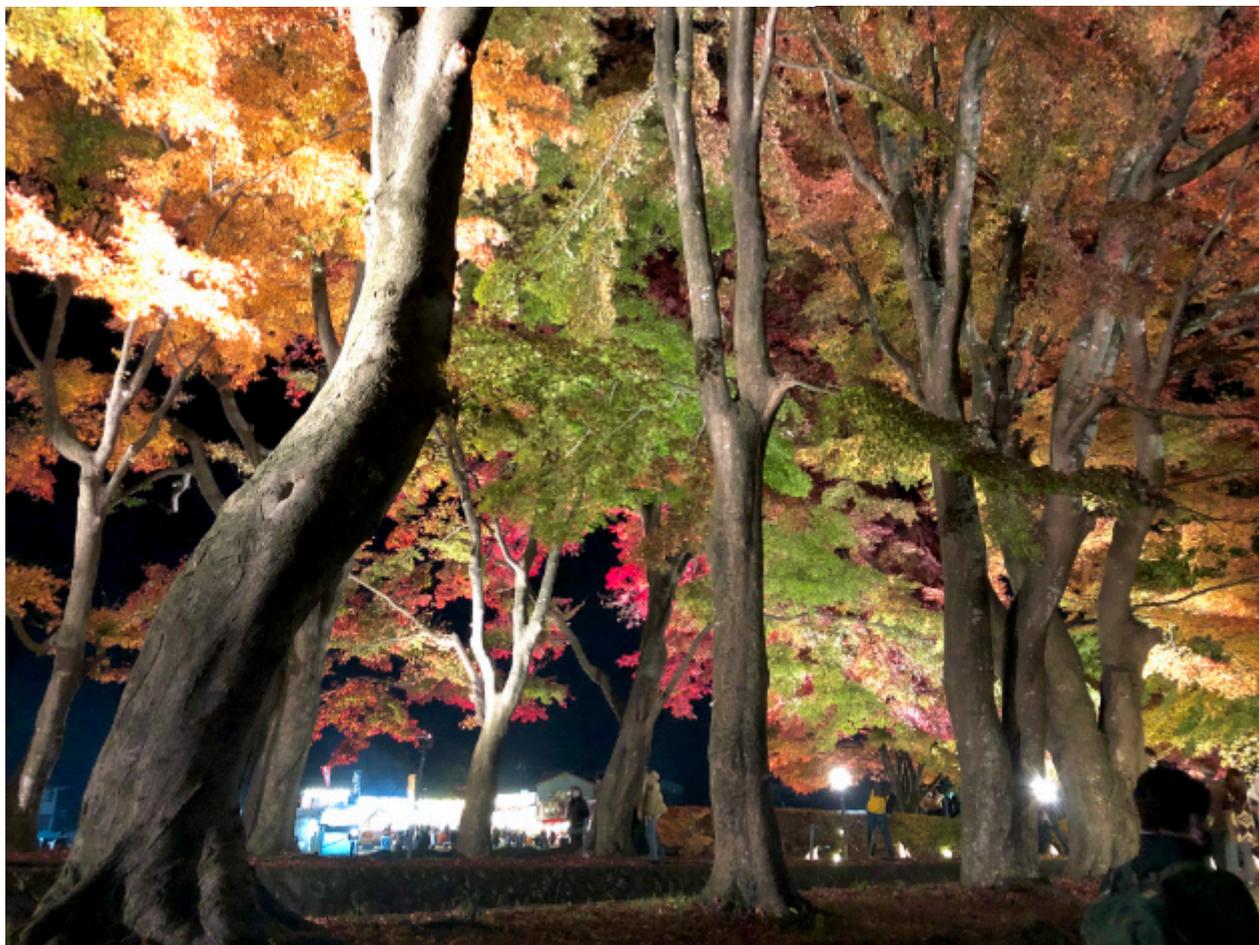
BEST COLOR FORECAST

Mark your calendar, because mid-November is considered the peak season for the trees in Kawaguchiko-machi to show their fall colors. The festival itself typically runs all throughout the month of November, so it should be pretty easy to find a date to squeeze in a trip to the Fuji Five Lakes area.

UNIQUE POINT

There are so many reasons I make sure never to miss this festival: local vendors selling toasty fall treats, *Sarumawashi* monkey performances, and of course—the beautiful *Momiji Corridor* which is a long-stretching walkway lined with overarching maple trees. Tinged with every fall hue you can imagine, the trees are best seen at night when they light up.





The lights are placed beneath the trees, creating a mesmerizing display of color contrasts when you look where the branches overlap. Other festivities are well underway by sunset as well, but it can get a bit chilly at nighttime. I make sure to always come bundled up in my favorite knits. By 10:00 p.m., the venue closes and everyone heads home.

SMALL DETOUR

I personally recommend the *Itchiku Kubota Art Museum*, which is conveniently located across the street from where the Autumn Leaves Festival takes place. The museum showcases an array of stunning kimono art pieces, and they even have a cute tea room at the back of the museum that serves fall-themed *wagashi* that are almost too beautiful to eat. While Yamanashi is a popular travel destination amongst the Japanese, I feel like it's still widely unknown within the foreign resident community. If you really want a taste of the traditional beauty of Japan, you should definitely put it on your bucket list!

Mck is a Coordinator of International Relations in Yamanashi, and she unironically loves Nicolas Cage and Nickelback.



A SECRET GARDEN, YOSHIMIZU-EN

Rachel Fagundes (Okayama)

THE SPOT

[Yoshimizu Garden](#) is a designated prefectural “Scenic Spot” in rural Hiroshima. Built in 1781 and renovated several times since, it’s a small, quiet, but stunning place to view fall foliage. The little garden contains a lovely pond and a simple, picturesque thatched-roof hut called Yoshimizu pavilion. It doesn’t take long to walk around the whole place, but you could certainly take your time there, sitting in the pavilion or photographing the leaves reflected in the pond.

BEST COLOR FORECAST

The garden is only open to the public on the second weekend of November, since that’s the peak autumn foliage season, and a few weekends in June, when you can check out the local tree frogs hatching. So, if you’re going for the leaves, the second weekend of November is your only option.





*Rachel Fagundes is a fifth year JET and the Head Editor of **CONNECT**. She likes cats, comic books, the Italian Renaissance, and Japanese festivals.*

UNIQUE POINT

It's out of the way and best accessed by car, which can make it a pain to get to, but that also cuts way down on other tourists. Unlike a lot of other fall foliage spots, which may be swamped with folks jostling each other to take pictures, you're likely to have this garden mostly to yourself. The fact that it's small and out of the way makes it a rare little gem.

SMALL DETOUR

There's a local *Kagura* festival that takes place that same second weekend of November not a stone's throw from Yoshimizu garden. Kagura is a type of folk theater in which masked dancers perform stories from Japanese Mythology. I think this local troupe performs the story of a great hero who defeats a multi-headed, maiden-devouring dragon by getting it absolutely wasted on sake before battling it. If you want to check it out, just listen for the sound of drums.

Yoshimizu Garden is also just under a 30-minute drive from [Sandankyo Gorge](#), so it would be pretty easy to hit up both spots in a day.





More Fall Foliage Spots

- [Japan Fall Foliage Forecast 2021—Famous Spots](#)
- [JR Rail Pass—Autumn in Japan](#)



HIROSHIMA

FUKUI

YAMANASHI

GIFU

GUNMA

SAITAMA

TOKYO

AOMORI

BONFIRES AND BOAR AT HAKUSAN'S INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL

Mari Kurata (Mie)

Interviewed by Sierra Nelson-Liner (Shizuoka)

All photos belong to Mari Kurata and Sierra Nelson-Liner.

I knew I was home away from home when I arrived in the town of Hakusan. Maple leaves were changing their colors, children were laughing and sliding down the grassy hill, smoky aromas from festival stalls reached my nose—their flavors carried along the crisp autumn wind.

My arrival was welcomed by warm hugs from Mari-san's two children. The stalls were getting set up for food and handmade crafts. Live music began to play and Mari-san grabbed my hand. We ran up to the front of the audience and began to dance to "*Chiisana Koi no Uta*," originally by Mongol800. The dancing carried into the evening as the coal fire cooking the wild boar kept us warm. It was a unique experience where I knew I was physically in Japan, but felt like I had just left the country. I am looking forward to attending the festival again this year.

I started volunteering at Harold and Mari-san's guest house and farm in August 2020 through [WWOOF Japan](#). Each visit has brought me closer to being a part of Hakusan's community. Hakusan-cho is a heart-warming countryside town that is internationally connected. Close to Tsu and Ise cities, it is the perfect escape from the hustle and bustle of city life. You can enjoy [onsen](#), seasonal [fruit picking](#), and stay at Harold and Mari-san's [Guest House Ilonggo](#). There you can learn about countryside living, farming, and about having a multi-national family in Japan. Harold is originally from Silay City in Negros Island, the Philippines. While you stay with their family you can learn about Filipino culture by eating some of his delicious [home-cooked Filipino food](#). Mari-san is a driven activist, mother, and community entrepreneur working to make her hometown an international-friendly one. This year she will host her town's third International festival on November 20, 2021. I hope you all can attend! You can purchase your festival ticket [here](#).



Harvesting vegetables with Harold and Mari-san and their two children.

FOR THOSE OF US WHO HAVEN'T HEARD OF YOUR FESTIVAL, WHAT DO YOU WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW ABOUT IT?

This festival is a unique way for you to experience the feelings of being in another country even as you are standing in our town in rural Japan. In the open market, you can purchase handmade crafts and try traditional foods from around the world. The festival is held in the late afternoon and carries into the night. This means that you can dance under the moon next to a bonfire with good music and professional performances. With this environment, you can't help but join in with the festivities. All of us together with lovely local and international people. It's a dream come true.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO START THIS INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL?

My experience in the Philippines and volunteering for the environment inspired me to continue international connections in Japan. I worked for an NGO, [Ikaw Ako](#), which focuses on reforestation along the coastline with mangrove trees. As a forester myself, I developed a community-based reforestation program in Negros. Many Japanese volunteers participated in activities in the Philippines which my program provided. I wanted to continue those connections, even as I remain in my hometown in Japan. Furthermore, the happy memories of festivals in the Philippines inspired me to hold a more international-style festival in my hometown. Of course, my husband is from the Philippines so I hope to also make him feel at home away from home.



WHAT IS YOUR BEST MEMORY OF THE FESTIVAL SO FAR?

Simply dancing together. I was so happy to meet my friends who are usually scattered all over Japan. It was lovely to see them and enjoy the festival together. There were many new foods for them to try, and people to meet for the first time. So, it was exciting to see.

WHAT IS SOMETHING THAT WOULD SURPRISE PEOPLE ABOUT YOUR FESTIVAL?

One of the main festival foods we prepare is the roasted whole pig, or wild boar. The boar is cooked on an open fire. As the festival extends into the night you can help rotate the pieces of meat. This is a nice community act within itself. Everyone who comes to the festival is invited to help prepare the wild boar together. It is a nice experience to teach people about Filipino cooking.

HOW CAN PEOPLE GET INVOLVED WITH SUPPORTING OR PARTICIPATING IN YOUR FESTIVAL?

Come and enjoy, meet us and start a conversation or join us for a dance! This year, we invited semi-professional performers. If there are no more COVID-19 restrictions, then we are going to make this event bigger.



WHAT IS THE MAIN PURPOSE OF YOUR FESTIVAL?

I really want to encourage interaction between foreign residents and local people. A lot of foreign residents are isolated in Japan. A lot of the time they are alone, or it might be difficult to make initial connections with local Japanese people. I would like to provide the environment for foreigners and locals to connect so that they can help each other and create a better life. This may start at my festival, but also continue through events I hold in my town hall.

WHAT ARE SOME OTHER WAYS YOU ARE BUILDING YOUR COMMUNITY IN HAKUSAN?

I organized a nonprofit organization named [Landing in HAKUSAN](#) with local young professionals. We are promoting this town as a farm tourism site. With the help of the national government, we made a map, a website, and promotional videos like this [one](#).

CAN YOU TALK MORE ABOUT STARTING YOUR TOWN HALL AND COMMUNITY CENTER?

I bought an old village hall, which is a romantic, wooden, two storey building. With the help of many people, I was able to renovate it and open it as a community shared space. We are going to hold different events to attract and allow for interaction between incoming people and local people.

WHAT EVENTS HAVE YOU HELD THERE?

We have held a huge series of events that promote local products and healthy lifestyles. For example, yoga and zumba classes. We have also held discussions after documentary movie showings, and provided alternative school classes for children.

WHY DO YOU WANT TO BUILD AN INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY IN YOUR TOWN?

My hometown has an aging population. I really want to revitalize it with young people. The idea of an “international town” attracts young people. Therefore, having an international community is key to revitalizing our town.

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SEE IN YOUR TOWN’S FUTURE?

I want our children to be proud of this town and want to stay here. I want more young people to feel as if they would be happy to live here long-term. I also hope our lands are cultivated and our forests are maintained with a good number of diverse plants and animals.



Mari Kurata is a friend, mother, and entrepreneur in her community and abroad. She has worked as a core-member of Ikaw Ako for 12 years. When she isn't working on promoting her town you can find Mari-san hunting, eating her husband's delicious [Filipino cuisine](#), or going on outdoor expeditions with her family. You can reach her on [instagram](#), through her town's [website](#), or the website for her [guest house](#).

*Sierra Nelson-Liner is a third year ALT in Hamamatsu City and is the Community Editor for this year's **CONNECT** Magazine. She enjoys biking to the beach and playing her ukulele at sunset. She wants to inspire cultural exchange through farming in the [Japanese countryside](#). Her current dreams are to experience safflower harvesting in Yamagata prefecture, visit the cedar trees in Yakushima, and start her own flower farm.*

星空の下で燃えよう！

INTER- NATIONAL FESTIVAL IN HAKUSAN

三重の里山で海外に行った気分になってみませんか？
日常生活から一歩踏み出し、非日常の世界を味わえる
インターナショナルフェスティバル。
焚き火を囲みながら、地域の外国人と交流しませんか？
LET'S ENJOY THE NATURE AND THE FEATURE!!
WELCOME!! EVERYBODY WHO LOVES MUSIC.

2021.11.20[Sat]

16:30～20:00

いのさん農園キャンプ場
三重県津市白山町佐田2745-1

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主催：Landing in HAKUSAN

<https://landing-in-hakusan.jp>

お問い合わせ：090-4415-4042

landinginhakusan@gmail.com (倉田)



アフリカンダンスカンパニー



アントニオ・カマケ



地球食YUKI



にいじゅん



マテ・モモ



鈴木照山

A RECAP OF LDP ELECTIONS, NEWLY ELECTED PRIME MINISTER KISHIDA, AND THE PATH FORWARD

A SEIJI SUMMARY

Samantha Stauch (Gunma)



This article was finalized in October before the election took place. Some information may have changed since this article's publication.

Following a whirlwind of major events and uncertainty, the Japanese political sphere has been disorienting for both its citizens and foreign onlookers. Between the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan's longest serving prime minister Abe Shinzo leaving office, the controversial Tokyo 2020 Olympics, and a short stint by former prime minister Suga Yoshihide, Japan has had its fair share of issues to deal with in the last 2 years. Yet, the months of September and October provided the Japanese government with an opportunity to decide how to answer the calls of discontent across the nation. (1) With the conclusion of the highly contested Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leadership race in September, and the hundreds of politicians who competed for only 465 seats in the lower house election held on October 31st, the end of 2021 is crucial in illustrating the path forward for Japan's future beyond the pandemic. (2)

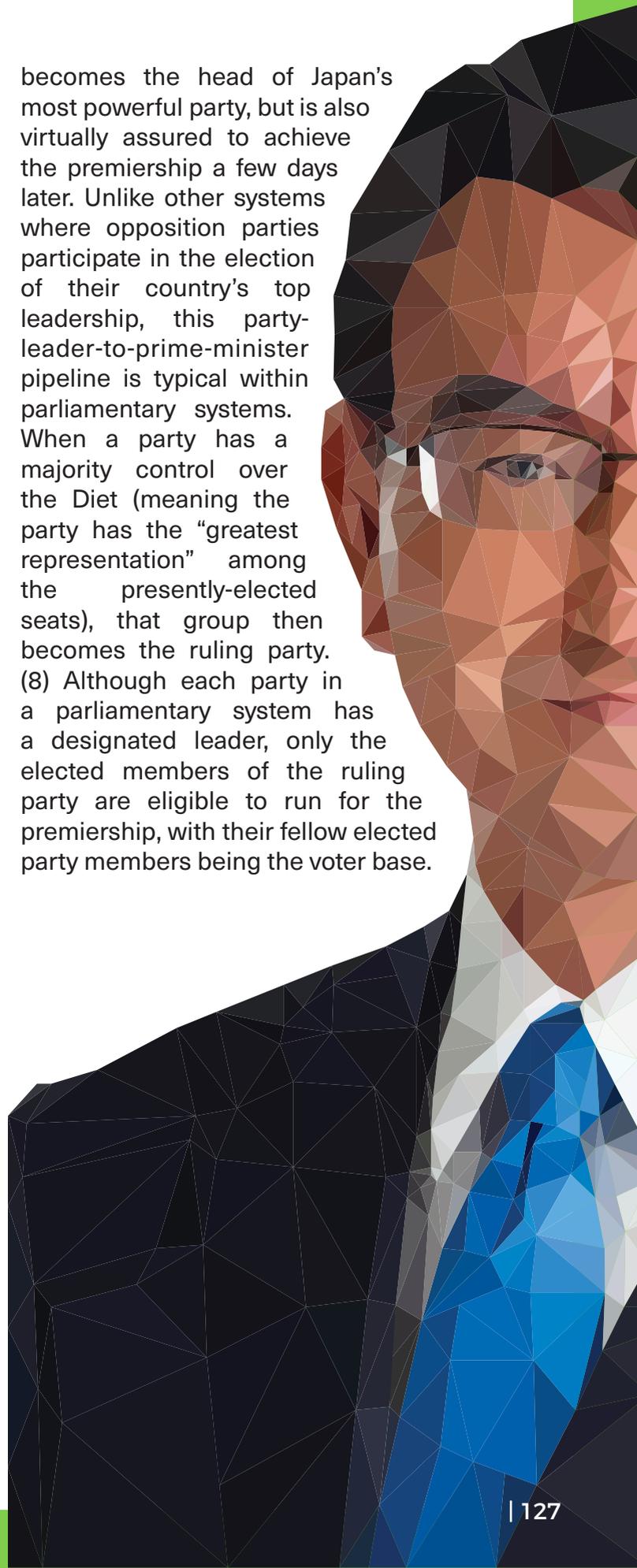
Whether we are very involved or not interested in the slightest, what happens in politics impacts the lives of every individual. As foreign residents in Japan, we cannot vote in these elections, but being a knowledgeable spectator of Japanese politics will give us the opportunity to better understand our current environment. This article will serve as a rundown of the current affairs in Japanese politics (also known as *seiji*). This includes the LDP leadership race, a brief look into the newly appointed prime minister—Kishida Fumio—and what we can expect from the upcoming administration.

LDP LEADERSHIP: MODERATE KISHIDA OVERTAKES MORE PROGRESSIVE HOPEFUL KONO

Cracks in LDP leadership initially began when the longest serving prime minister and LDP heavy-weight—Abe Shinzo—stepped down due to illness suddenly in August 2020. (3) Shortly after, he was succeeded by Suga Yoshihide, who inherited the position in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and the planning of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. These events created a great deal of uncertainty and fear in those residing in Japan. The trepidation soon turned to public outrage when citizens—fueled by widespread panic towards rising COVID-19 cases—began to openly protest the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. (4, 5) Once the Olympics commenced, Suga’s public approval took a turn for the worst. Suga began his tenure at a very strong 66.4% approval rate, but the Games cut the short-lived administration’s popularity—ultimately dropping it to an all-time low of less than 30% approval. (6) This is known as “the point of no return”. (4) Recognizing the writing on the wall, Suga later announced that he would not be running for re-election and would be subsequently resigning on October 4 when his term expired. (7) The news of Suga’s resignation was initially shocking given his short time in office, but was hardly surprising given the exponential drop in public support just weeks before the highly-competitive, intraparty LDP leadership election.

On the afternoon of September 29, 2021, Japan’s major ruling party, the LDP, (which has largely remained in power since its creation in 1955) held their highly-anticipated leadership race. The winner of the party election not only

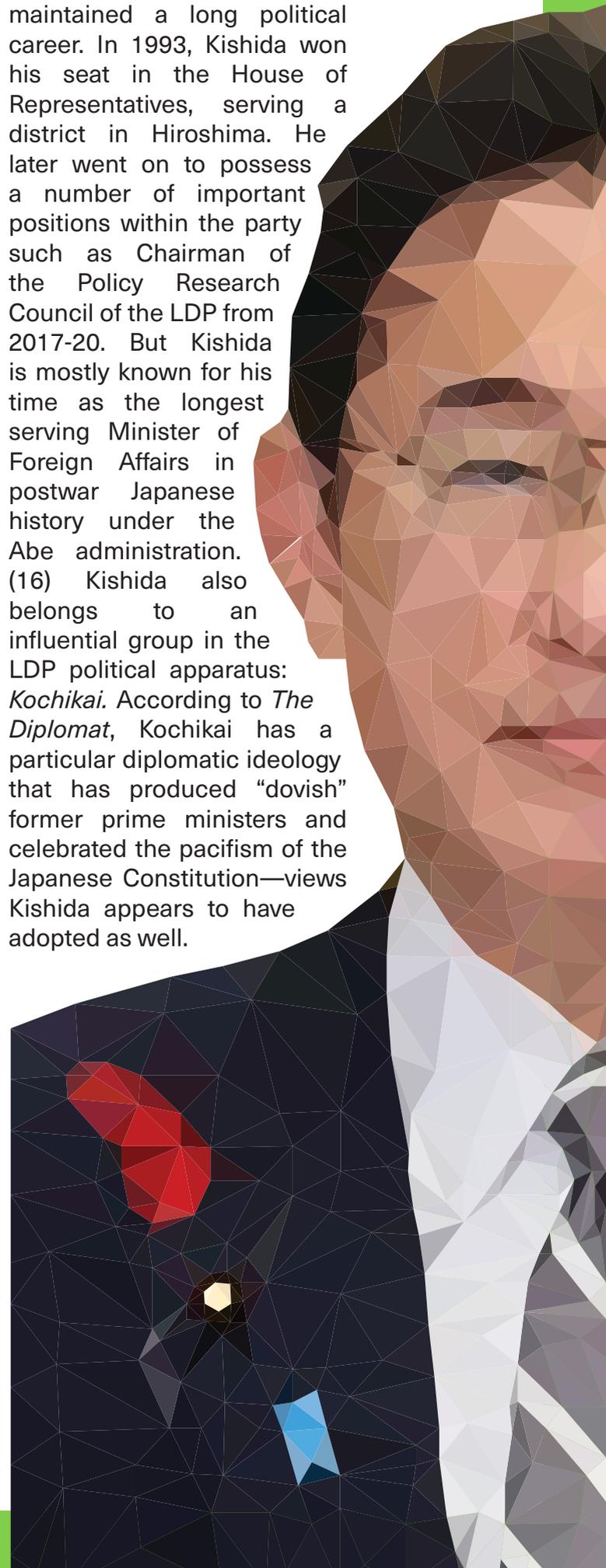
becomes the head of Japan’s most powerful party, but is also virtually assured to achieve the premiership a few days later. Unlike other systems where opposition parties participate in the election of their country’s top leadership, this party-leader-to-prime-minister pipeline is typical within parliamentary systems. When a party has a majority control over the Diet (meaning the party has the “greatest representation” among the presently-elected seats), that group then becomes the ruling party. (8) Although each party in a parliamentary system has a designated leader, only the elected members of the ruling party are eligible to run for the premiership, with their fellow elected party members being the voter base.



In Japan's case, the two top brass members and possible candidates for the race—Abe and Suga—were down and out due to their respective circumstances. Thus, four candidates—Kishida Fumio, Kono Taro, Takaichi Sanae, and Noda Seiko—were provided a golden opportunity to try their hand at becoming the leader of the LDP, and therefore Japan's prime minister. (9) Despite having a historic showing with two female candidates—Takaichi and Noda—in a traditionally conservative party, the two candidates to watch were indeed Kono and Kishida.

Kono, who began his political career in 1996, has held various major positions in the Abe and Suga cabinets: Minister of Foreign Affairs (2017-19), Minister of Defense (2019-20), and Minister for Administrative Reform and Regulatory Reform (2020 - present). (10) The title you may know him by is actually as the "Vaccine Czar." Kono was placed in charge of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout, during which he has been conducting public outreach to boost confidence and raise awareness about the vaccines. (11, 12) This has greatly increased his visibility and popularity among the Japanese citizens in recent months. Thus, the seasoned politician was widely considered the favorite for the premiership by many popular opinion polls. (13) With a whopping 2.3 million followers on Twitter, the public's interest in him far exceeds that of his opponent whose following rests in the low 300,000 range. Advocating more progressive ideas than his counterparts such as legalizing gay marriage, protecting the pacifist Article 9 in the Japanese Constitution, and criticizing the relationships between politicians and business leaders, Kono is without a doubt a maverick within his party and in Japanese political history. (14, 15)

Like Kono, Kishida has maintained a long political career. In 1993, Kishida won his seat in the House of Representatives, serving a district in Hiroshima. He later went on to possess a number of important positions within the party such as Chairman of the Policy Research Council of the LDP from 2017-20. But Kishida is mostly known for his time as the longest serving Minister of Foreign Affairs in postwar Japanese history under the Abe administration. (16) Kishida also belongs to an influential group in the LDP political apparatus: *Kochikai*. According to *The Diplomat*, *Kochikai* has a particular diplomatic ideology that has produced "dovish" former prime ministers and celebrated the pacifism of the Japanese Constitution—views Kishida appears to have adopted as well.



During his tenure as the Minister of Foreign Affairs (2012-17) and over the course of his political career, Kishida made a name for himself as being “calm and honest.” This point is strongly illustrated in his track record when dealing with foreign nations. Between Kishida’s connections to the US and his ties to Kochikai—a traditionally pro-China organization—these diplomatic relationships make Kishida well-equipped for walking the tightrope and balancing the relationships between Japan, China, and the United States. (17)

Both candidates have their strengths in their respective areas of expertise with plenty of support coming from different factions of the Japanese political sphere. But unfortunately for Kono, public popularity does not reign supreme in the LDP leadership race. Instead, it would be Kishida coming out on top among his fellow candidates.

The Diet commenced the initial election, totaling 762 votes from 380 lawmakers and 382 rank and file members. (18) This led to a 256-255 close win for Kishida over Kono, with Takaichi and Noda far behind the two men. The following run-off consisted of a slightly different voter base—380 lawmakers and 47 prefectural representatives. Kishida, who has solid support within the party, was able to overcome Kono’s public favour in a 257-170 comfortable win. (18, 19) With that, on September 29, Kishida Fumio became the new prime minister-designate of Japan. (20) But what are the new prime minister’s proposed policies for the future?

KISHIDA'S GAME PLAN AND WHAT COMES NEXT

Kishida has expressed that he will implement “careful and tolerant” politics during his tenure as prime minister, making him the safe choice during a time of public unrest and dissatisfaction. (21) Although Kishida is of a similar ilk to previous LDP leaders and is expected to continue policies like that of the previously long-reigning Abe administration. (22) This declaration of “careful and tolerant” politics actually puts him in a stark contrast with the actions of the Abe and Suga administrations, according to *The Asahi Shimbun*. The newspaper quotes these administrations as being hallmarked by “unilateral changes in the government’s interpretations of laws, abuse of the ruling coalition’s dominance in the Diet and tendency to turn a deaf ear to dissenting voices and remove people with different opinions.” (21) These aggressive tactics were meant to ensure that LDP policies were established with as little opposition as possible. However, Kishida seems keeping in line with his Kochikai roots by attempting to not rock the boat among the Diet members and working to smooth over tensions among the public.

The opening polls for the new Kishida administration were less than ideal. Two days into his role as prime minister, the ratings were reportedly between 45% on the low end among more liberal newspapers and 59% on the high end among more conservative newspapers. (23) At the same point last year, the brand new Suga cabinet had polled a positive 66% approval among the Japanese population. Yet, within the year he would hit a new, astonishing low of 26% nationwide approval. (24, 25) Kishida later expressed that he would reflect on the low approval ratings; but can the new prime minister beat the odds and meet the expectations of his people?

For starters, his game plan appears to be intently focused on economic policy, specifically in directing resources to the financial ruins of the business sector and everyday people due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In his own words, Kishida has expressed interest in pursuing a “new capitalism.” This includes addressing the growing wealth inequality in

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Japan by aiming to improve wages for lower and middle class citizens, creating a COVID-19 assistance package, and increasing taxes on those with financial assets totaling more than ¥100 million. (26) These proposed changes did not bode well for Kishida in the few days after he officially ascended to the position of prime minister on October 4, 2021. Two days later, headlines hit with “Kishida Shock.” Stocks took a hit and the news trended across Twitter with memes and jokes poking at Kishida’s interest in wealth redistribution. Negative reactions from the business sector caused Kishida to later walk back his comments on the capital gains tax. Instead, he suggested that he would be focused on creating “economic growth before redistributing wealth.” (27) The prime minister has previously emphasized his commitment to financial changes with comments such as, “There is no new growth without redistribution. If the fruits of growth are not redistributed, consumption and demand will not increase.” (28)

In retrospect, the title of this article has a unique way of tying into the new prime minister’s

diplomatic philosophy. Looking at the word Seiji, the Kanji *sei* refers to government or politics and the *ji* character can mean “to be at peace,” “to cure,” and “to conserve”. (29) The definition of seiji relates to Prime Minister Kishida’s personal ideology and also the upcoming work he has cut out for him. Party support, public support, and economic support: these are the major interests that Kishida must balance if he is to have a successful, long-running tenure. Will the careful and tolerant politician be able to gain the respect of all three? Or will he ultimately choose to focus on only one of these areas, leaving the others behind?

*Sam is a General Section Editor for **CONNECT** and a first-year ALT in Gunma with a passion for politics, One Piece, and astrology. When she’s not reading political theory, she’s probably choosing the perfect 15 second interval of a song for an Instagram story everyone will skip or saving an incalculable amount of cryptic memes. She also loves her cat Taiga, Korra from Legend of Korra, and the Pokémon Dragonite.*

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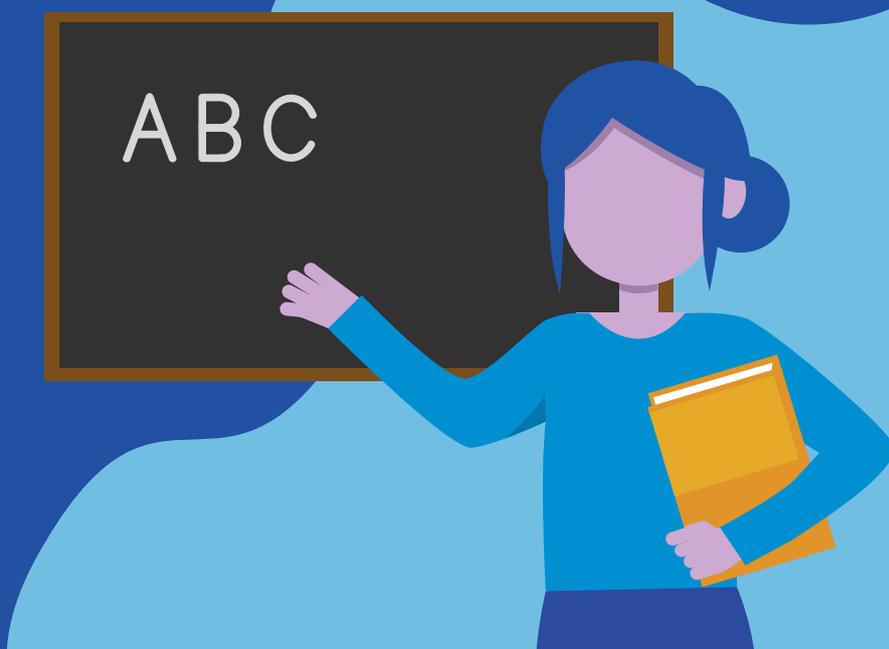
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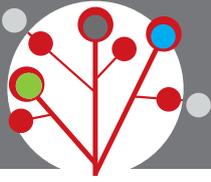
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