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Arts & Culture, Lifestyle, Travel & Community

CONNECT



# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Hello Lovely Readers, and welcome to the new year! It's the perfect time to curl up under the kotatsu with a very special January issue of **CONNECT**!

This month we have a special winter-themed issue for your entertainment, full of news, reviews, recommendations, and interviews—all about winter sports, seasonal fruit, holiday destinations, and fabulous festivals. Here are a few of my top picks to get you started:

The Culture article, The Fire-Setting Battles of Nozawa Onsen, interviews a participant in one of the most jaw-dropping festivals in Japan, Nozawa's *Dosojin Matsuri*—in which middle-aged men are sent up into a wooden tower while the rest of the village rallies around with flaming torches and attempts to set the tower alight. No, *really*. That's *actually* what happens. If you want to know why, you'll have to read on to find out. I was lucky enough to hit up this festival myself a few years back and it is absolutely *wild*. I'm thrilled that we were able to get a wonderful inside look at this spectacular fire festival.

After learning about fire festivals, how about ice? The Art section delves into the famous Sapporo Snow Festival where towering snow and ice sculptures line the streets.

Three different snow-sculpture artists share their experiences working in this unusual medium—and how it has changed their lives.

Travel's Beyond the Peaks: Freezing Cool Destinations is a fantastic article full of great ideas for places to visit this winter. Check it out to discover hidden gems all over Japan, whether you want to ride a fabulous food train, meet awesome sled dogs, or get away from the cold entirely.

Finally, I'd recommend the Wellness section's The Healing Powers of Onsen. In the depths of winter few things are more appealing than a hot-springs soak. This helpful article explains a variety of different mineral onsens and highlights recommended spots for each, as well as introducing some interesting onsen history and useful onsen etiquette. Do you want to know which types of onsen are best for your circulation, or which to avoid if you have sensitive skin? Look no further.

These and other marvelous articles await you in the winter issue of **CONNECT**!

Cheers,

*Rachel Spain Fagundes*

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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](mailto: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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*"I wonder if the snow loves the trees and fields, that it kisses them so gently? And then it covers them up snug, you know, with a white quilt; and perhaps it says, 'Go to sleep, darlings, till the summer comes again.'"* — Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

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*"In the middle of winter I at last discovered that there was in me an invincible summer."*  
— Albert Camus, *L'été*

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*"Time longa dan rope" (Time is longer than a rope) Meaning: one ought to be patient, work hard and wait until your time comes.*  
— Unknown

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*"It's fine. Luckily we're all English so no-one's going to ask any questions. Thank you, centuries of emotional repression!"* — Mark Corrigan, *Peep Show*

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*"I don't know where I'm going from here but I promise it won't be boring."* — David Bowie

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*"I will not have my life narrowed down. I will not bow down to somebody else's whim or to someone else's ignorance."*  
— bell hooks

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*"Learn everything. Fill your mind with knowledge—it's the only kind of power no one can take away from you." Hansu never told him to study, but rather to learn, and it occurred to Noa that there was a marked difference. Learning was like playing, not labor."* — Min Jin Lee, *Pachinko*

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



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*"I believe that all objects contain energy that embodies a feeling." — Joanna Powell*

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

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*"A friend had commented once that Neal had a gift for making someone want to punch him just for saying hello." — Tamora Pierce, Squire*



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# The Sapporo Snow Festival

*Three Experiences Carving Massive Snow Sculptures*

Simon Daly (Hokkaido), Catrina Caira (Hokkaido), and Jessica Stutte (Hokkaido) interviewed by Jessica Craven (Saitama)

## About the Sapporo Snow Festival

(Simon Daly)

The Sapporo Snow Festival features multiple venues across the city, but the main one runs the length of Odori Koen, from the Sapporo TV Tower down (about 14 city blocks).

The sculptures come in three types and sizes. There are the *big* sculptures that take up the whole width of a city block. They are constructed and carved by private contractors with the support of the city and sometimes even Japan's self-defense forces. They are huge, impressive, and created over the couple of weeks leading up to the festival. They are usually themed or branded and are made using a mixture of hand and power tools.

There are also smaller community pieces, usually not more than two meters in any direction. Volunteer groups spend their own time leading up to the event carving

whatever they like. These tend to be cute pieces, such as popular manga or anime characters, but nothing overly ambitious or complicated and created using any tools the sculptors prefer.

Then there is the international competition. This is an invitation-only event where teams representing up to 16 countries or sister cities compete *during* the festival, so artists are carving while people are milling around the event as a live interactive spectacle. A team must have not only an invitation but the backing of an embassy or a nationally recognized body. Teams carve for four days from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., after which there is a nationally televised awards ceremony. For the latter event, a team starts with a cube that is three meters on each side and moves literal tons of snow—all without power tools of any kind . . . just chisels, saws, and brute force.







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**JS:** I des  
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**JC:** What was your involvement with the snow festival, and how did you first get involved? Who else did you work with?

I designed statues for both the 2008 and Sapporo Snow Festival. These were some smaller community pieces. After my first year at the festival, I thought it looked like it could be a good experience and signed up to participate in the following year for a lot. For the first year, I asked fellow JETs, my friends, my taiko team, and associates for help. We worked for a week from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. each day to get it done. For the second year, I asked my school if students could help, and they joined along with the crew from the first year.

**S:** I competed in the international snow carving competitions as a part of the New Zealand team for five years, four of which as captain. How I got involved is a heartwarming parable of how involvement in one thing leads to bigger and better things. Arriving as a part of the 2009 JET intake, I quickly got involved in a publication for Hokkaido AJET (HAJET), which was seen by a member of the New Zealand snow carving team, who invited me to join in 2010. I recommended my good friend Matarahi Skipper (a Hiroshima JET from my intake), with his background in Maori carving, to be the perfect addition to round out the three-person team. In my five years competing, he and I teamed up four times with other members rotating through each year. Diverse cultural representation was paramount to us when trying to represent the rich tapestry of Aotearoa. For example, team members such as Solomon Daniel and Sofara Aiono came from New Zealand Samoan heritages. Everyone brought different ideas, skills, and strengths.

**C:** I carved my first snow sculpture as part of my local town's ice festival (Higashikawa). Then, I forget if it was the block leader or the Sapporo CIR who suggested for JETs to make a sculpture for the Sapporo Snow Festival. . . . The block leader for block one put out a request for interested parties, and I responded. I was the only one with any actual snow carving experience, so I told everyone what to expect and helped design a sculpture we could carve with many members who were beginners. We decided to design a snow sculpture of the AJET mascot because we were all members of block 1, and *Frozen* was recently released, so the song "Do You Want to Build a Snowman?" was on our minds. The final idea was of the AJET mascot, Tsuru-chan, building a snowman.



**JC: Do you have an artistic background, or what drew you to this activity?**

**JS:** I have a B.A. in studio art, but my focus was photography and painting. Sculpting was a first for me!

**S:** My background is as a chef, which I am back exploring through my monthly column in *The Japan Times*. The “still life” [sculptural aesthetic of plating](#) has always interested me and is surprisingly applicable to snow carving. I have to admit though . . . in the competition, I saw myself as more of an architect or engineer. With all members having creative input, it is crucial to have someone keeping an eye on what is possible given limited time and the limitations of snow as a medium, keeping the design consistent and for safety.

**C:** I love knowing how to make things for myself. I have taken so many creative workshops that I have lost count. But I’m definitely a maker. I make costumes and kimonos and have made pottery and leather armor. . . . I can make wooden furniture, stained glass, and have a certificate for silversmithing and jewelry design. I also studied art conservation for my master’s degree. But I took the approach to try everything when I came here. So I was asked if I wanted to help, I immediately said yes. I enjoyed helping, so I continued to do so for the rest of my time on JET.

**JC: What is the process of creating snow sculptures like? Would you say it is more organized, or is it more intuitive?**

**S:** For the international competition, you have to plan ahead of time. That is not to say that there is no interpretation or change. For example, if the weather stays cold has a huge influence on what can be put into the piece. If it stays cold, you can do very fine. If it is warmer, these details are not possible. It is a technical element that is all very important. What shapes, such as overhangs, are possible with compacted snow. It is also important because the more precarious a design is, the more dynamic by extension, how dynamic it can feel. But if the designs collapse—which thankfully doesn’t happen—but is always a danger, both in the design and safety.

**C:** The process involves submitting a design, winning a spot through the lottery system, and then where the selected teams must create their sculpture where they get to make or bring a model of their sculpture. The model needs to be very detailed. The Organizers will decide details, such as what supports the designer will need, and they will also approve the final design. If they find anything they find problematic. Some teams (with carving experience) are at the event to help with the challenges. They also provide clay and tools so carvers can simply bring their models and leave. Finally, in the week leading up to the event, the actual sculpture out of snow.



**Creating these monumental sculptures says the process is fairly straightforward, right?**

When all designs are submitted, there isn't room for creative compromise, whether the weather allows how much fine detail can be added. If it's too warm, the detail can be lost; if it's too cold, the details will just sluff off. There is a lot of organization, such as knowing which designs are supported or unsupported arches, are not. It is always a balancing act between design, the more difficult, and the weather. The trouble is that some people have never happened to us—competition and to your own

When you have a design and then hopefully a drawing. Then, there is a day when you come to a design workshop, where you make a clay model of their proposed design, very close to the final product. You discuss such as how many wooden supports and take notes. Organizers then suggest changes for several organizers (with snow) to help new people with any questions and some tools. Experienced people help to get it approved and then up to the festival, teams carve

**JC: How long did it take to carve one of the sculptures, and how was that time spread out?**

**JS:** Working with snow is like gardening in some ways. You prune a bit at a time until the shape reveals itself. The snow provided doesn't have the same consistency all the way through, and chunks would fall out. That was challenging. The warm weather would melt the snow during the day, and it would freeze some at night. So it would freeze over, and we would have to work with ice. And it was cold! Frequent trips to conbini for warm drinks kept us going. Most people would come for an hour or two as four to five hours at a time was a big commitment.

**C:** We worked for about five hours on Friday night, between eight and ten hours on Saturday, and between three and five hours on Sunday. You start carving out the rough shape of the design and work from top to bottom. To start, you look at the design and its proportions. Then, you mark general edges on the snow and chip away to reach them. Next, you refine the general shape once the big chunks have been removed and start rounding everything out to get the 3D shape. You create the details last.





**JC: What was the most fulfilling part for you about this experience?**

**JS:** I did a radio interview—which was pretty neat—but honestly being able to look back and see what we could accomplish coming together is pretty incredible.

**S:** Being a competition, you might think that coming in second one year (losing out to the perennially amazing Thai team) would be it. That said, without sounding too cliché, it has to be the people and relationships. I loved doing it, and, in large part, that was to see some of the same friends from previous years. Most years, I was the only Hokkaido-based participant, which led me to be a surrogate tour guide for the other fifty competing members and led to many late nights in Sapporo. Even now, I am still in good contact with the artists who make the Ice Hotel in northern Sweden, a bunch of Lithuanian bohemians, and internationally renowned sculptors from Hong Kong. All of whom I feel lucky to now call friends. It was also an amazing way to contribute back to Japan. No event is perfect, but I highly recommend getting involved where one can, and it will certainly lead down a rabbit hole to wonderland, winter or otherwise.



*Jessica Stutte spent three years in Sapporo on JET after teaching at eikaiwa in Wakayama and Saitama. She enjoys teaching swimming in her free time along with planning her next trip, which usually involves catching up with JET alumni. You can find her on [Instagram](#).*

*Simon Daly is a New Zealander and was a JET for five years in Hokkaido, where he is now a permanent resident. He enjoys backcountry skiing, cycle touring, and stand-up paddling. His hobbies fit somewhere between meals, which he documents daily on [Instagram](#) and monthly in his column in [The Japan Times](#).*

*Catrina Caira is a JET alumni from Canada, who is currently still living in Hokkaido. She enjoys tea ceremony, hiking, board games and sewing. She has previously written an [article](#) about the Sapporo Snow Festival for AJET.*

*Jessica Craven 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](#).*

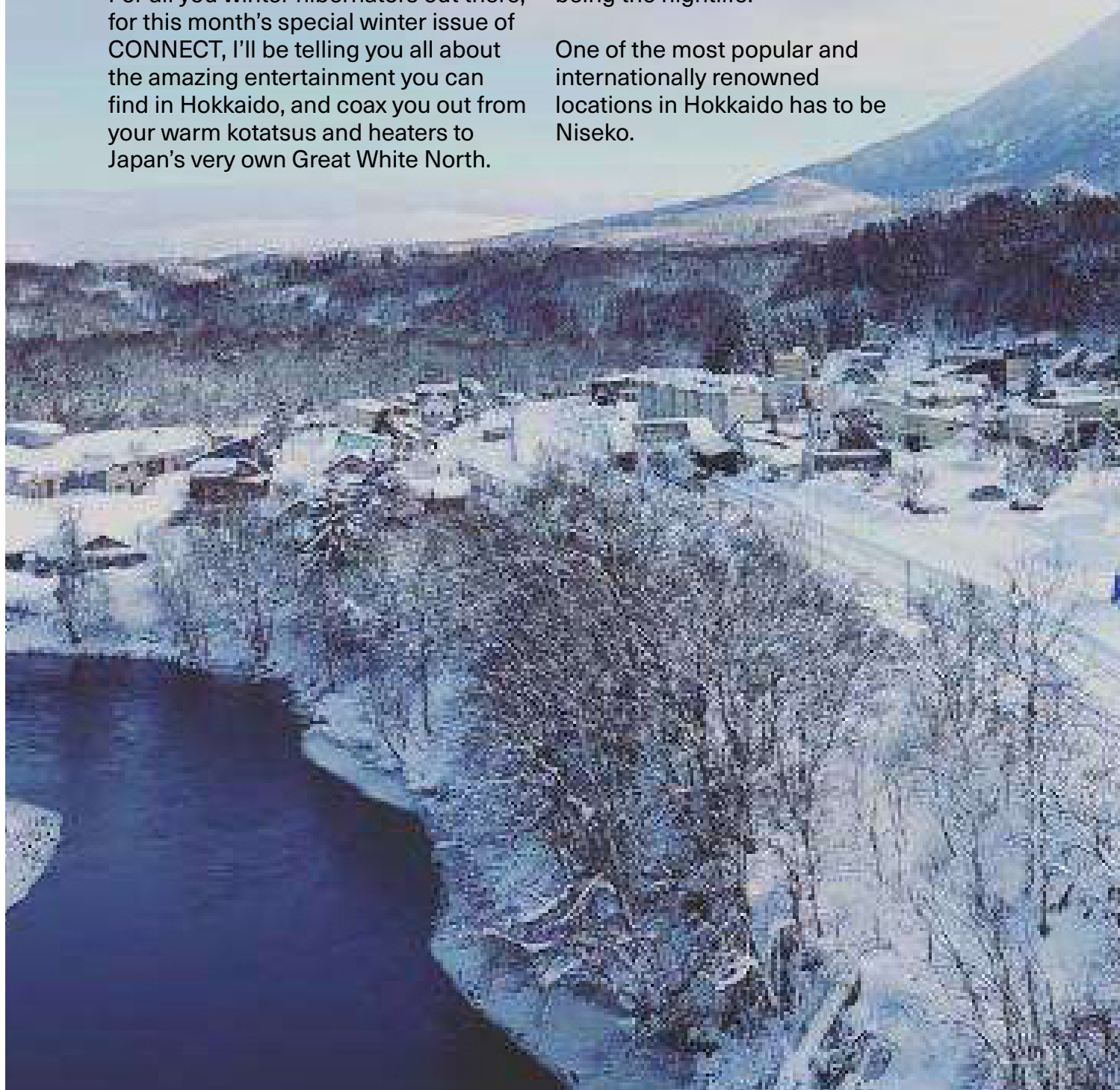


Hokkaido. The rugged, rough, northernmost prefecture of Japan. Just the mention of the name conjures images of snow-carpeted fields, steaming hot miso ramen and lavish ski resorts.

For all you winter hibernators out there, for this month's special winter issue of CONNECT, I'll be telling you all about the amazing entertainment you can find in Hokkaido, and coax you out from your warm kotatsus and heaters to Japan's very own Great White North.

Having lived in Hokkaido for four months working as a bartender and waiter at both a Latin American Bar and a shabu-shabu restaurant, I have some experience with entertainment in that area, first and foremost being the nightlife.

One of the most popular and internationally renowned locations in Hokkaido has to be Niseko.






An aerial photograph of a Japanese town in winter. The town is covered in a thick layer of snow, with several buildings visible, including a prominent red-roofed structure. In the background, a large, snow-covered mountain rises against a clear blue sky. The overall scene is peaceful and picturesque.

# *A Winter Wonderland:*

## Entertainment & Fun in Hokkaido

Fergus Gregg (Kobe)



The background image is a winter scene in a ski town. In the foreground, a rustic wooden fence made of vertical posts and horizontal rails is partially covered in snow. Beyond the fence, a snowy slope leads up to a ski lift system with several gondolas visible against a backdrop of snow-covered mountains and some evergreen trees. The sky is overcast and grey.

This small ski town is famous across the globe for its excellent powder skiing and natural beauty, but when it comes to entertainment, the real power in this area is the town of Kutchan. This local city plays host to the scores of foreign workers who come to the towns of Niseko and Kutchan during the ski season, and as such exudes a multicultural atmosphere.

Nowhere is this more clear than in the local Latin American bar and grill El Asador. Now, I may certainly be biased towards this particular venue, considering I worked there as a member of the bar staff, but the merits of the restaurant speak for themselves.

The expansive two-floor layout allows customers to sit at ease and enjoy a wide selection of tequilas and rums on their fairly priced *nomihodai* (all-you-can-drink) plan, all the while waiting for the mouth-watering food to arrive. In my experience, their best dish is their renowned Cuban Sandwich. Perfectly prepared pork belly, with habanero, jalapeño, cheese, and pickle, served on a toasted baguette, will overwhelm your taste buds with a meal so delicious, you'd be tempted to apply for a job just so you can enjoy this exquisite sandwich every day. That is what I did, after all.





Secondary to its role as an eatery, if you enter El Asador on one of its “Latin Nights” you’d better be ready to party. Once a month during the ski season, El Asador will bring in a DJ, specialising in Latin dance music, reduce the prices of drinks dramatically, and welcome all off the street to enjoy dancing, dining and, of course, drinking. After all, if there’s one thing I’ve learned from working in this bar that seems almost like a veritable copacabana located in Hokkaido, is that there’s always time for dancing.

Now, if by excellent happenstance you find yourself in Niseko on New Year’s Eve, you’ll be in for a treat. Across Mount Niseko, but primarily in the Grand Hirafu area, skiers have their own tradition for ringing in the new year. Be sure to dress warm as this activity will have you going out into the snow for a time, but it will be well worth it.



When I experienced this New Year's celebration, I was unaware of this tradition and was having a drink at Tamashii's Bar. This apres bar is a bit more expensive than other places in Kutchan; however, being a mere five-minute walk from the ski lifts at Grand Hirafu, it's well worth the convenience and offers a range of food from rump steak to the famous Hokkaido miso ramen. Tamashii's owners are firm believers that everyone should be having a good time; to accommodate this, they frequently host DJs, provide dart boards and pool tables, and boast a dizzyingly selection of gins, whiskeys, and beers. This fine bar was where I found myself on New Year's Eve 2020 before my friend dragged me out into the snow. I was led a short way up to the base of the slopes, cold and confused, when I started to notice the thronging crowds. Partygoers flock to the base of Mount Niseko on New Year's Eve, so they might see the New Year's skiers. These skiers catch chair lifts up to the top of the mountain at 11 p.m. before hiking to the summit. There, they light flaming torches, before brandishing them all the way to the bottom of the mountain.

This array of beacons, enhanced by the obscuring snow and darkness, ominously looms out of the night, drawing closer as the clock approaches midnight. As they reach the bottom of the hill, the fireworks start and the mountain is lit up by a spectacle of bright lights dancing off of the ice. This memorable experience is easily one of the best kept secrets of Hokkaido and a must see for any skiing enthusiast, or if you're more like me, just a guy who likes a nice show of lights and the passionate work of others.

Moving away from the ski fields, Sapporo is synonymous with the idea of a winter city. Its underground malls and walkways, well-insulated buildings, and famous Snow Festival establish a glowing reputation for a city that knows how to enjoy the cold times of the year. While the Snow Festival remains the city's main claim to wintery fame, the German Market is another great source of entertainment.





Between Nov. 22 and Dec. 25, Odori Park is taken over by a phenomenally festive Christmas village. Derived from the Christmas markets of Germany, this market place is a smorgasbord of moreish foods, like pretzels, apple tarts, and frankfurter sausages. To wash this all down is traditionally made mulled wine, German beers, and hot chocolates made with lashings of whipped cream and cinnamon. Also available for purchase among the stalls are handcrafted Christmas decorations. Whether you're a Christian looking for scenes that depict the nativity, or someone who merely likes cut carvings of reindeer, these decoration shops have something for everyone.

It's easy to let the day slip away in this Christmas market, but if you do end up going, I suggest you stick around till nightfall. Then, Odori Park and the entire area around it will be lit up in elaborate displays of Christmas lights of all colours. Meanwhile in the market, singing groups will start to perform Christmas songs from across the world.

Don't get me wrong, when it comes to winter the, Sapporo Snow Festival, with its elaborate sculptures and feats of artistic ingenuity, is second to none. If you do enjoy the lead up to Christmas and find yourself in Sapporo a month earlier, however, the German Christmas market is a charming and warming consolation prize.





As a personal recommendation, while the distances in Hokkaido may be a little daunting, renting a car can really enhance your experience. If on taking the backroads to your next location, you find a festival, old cinema, luxurious local onsen, or the best shabu-shabu of your life, then that would be something special indeed.

*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.*













# The Fire-Setting Battles of Nozawa Onsen

Kono Katsuyuki (Nagano)

interviewed by Marco Oliveros (Tokushima)

Japan hosts many great festivals year-round, and fire is a key element in many of them. The ski resort village of Nozawa Onsen holds one of the biggest: the Nozawa Onsen Dosojin Fire Festival, or Nozawa Onsen *Dosojin Matsuri* for short. In something called a “fire-setting” battle, villagers fight to light or prevent the lighting of a huge effigy of wood to get rid of bad luck and bring in good fortune. Kono Katsuyuki, a native of Nozawa Onsen, tells us more.

**Thank you for your time Mr. Kono. Could you tell me a little about yourself and Nozawa Onsen village?**

My name is Katsuyuki Kono and I was born and raised in Nozawa Onsen. From the age of 15, I spent five years living in Austria where I trained as a ski racer. Nozawa Onsen has a unique tie with St. Anton in Austria as its sister village and young local skiers still go back and forth between the two.

Currently, I am running the [Shirakaba hotel and rental shop](#) as the third-generation owner, as well as the restaurant that we opened in 2015, called Shichirohei, which is next to our hotel and offers a great selection of natural wines and a menu based on local and home-grown produce.

**Could you tell me a bit about the origins and reasons behind the Fire Festival? Why do the people of Nozawa Onsen celebrate it?**

The festival dates back to before 1839, which is the year that the earliest records of it begin.

It is a celebration of the [Dosojin deities of Nozawa](#) which are believed to ward off plague as well as bring about prosperity in marriage and child-bearing.

Traditionally, locals would celebrate the birth of the first grandson to their household with a lantern bearing the grandson's

name during the festival. Today, it is no longer exclusive to the eldest grandson but celebrates the birth of all children whilst wishing them a prosperous and healthy future.

**Playing with fire during the festival sounds exciting and a little dangerous. Is it safe during the Fire Festival?**

Using fire is a traditional part of Japanese festivals and common across many regions. In Nozawa, we seem to have a particular attraction to it, and our Fire Festival is one of the country's three biggest and most famous.

It is safe and as a spectator there is nothing to worry about, though the younger men do sometimes get a few burns here and there.

**What are the major events of the Fire Festival? I heard there's a “fire-setting battle?” Have you also participated in the festival before?**



The Fire Festival takes place on the 15th of January each year. The key players on the day, and in the build-up, are the 23-year-old and 39 to 41-year-old men in the village. This is because these are the two stages of bad luck, or *yakudoshi*, that men are believed to go through in their lifetime. One of the main purposes of the Fire Festival is to rid these men of their bad luck. Yakudoshi for women are the ages of 19 and 33. In both cases they are simply unlucky years in a person's lifetime.

For men, this is where the "fire battle" comes in. There are two *shaden* towers, the main *shaden* and the fire *shaden*. At the pinnacle of the festival, the older men sit on the top of the main *shaden* and drop fire torches to the villagers below, while the younger men stand at the base of it. Villagers can then pick up these torches and light them at the fire *shaden* to begin the "battle" which involves trying to set the main *shaden* on fire. The younger men's role is to prevent the villagers from succeeding and to protect the main *shaden* and the older men on top of it.

There is one other major event that takes place two days prior, which involves dragging two trees from the mountain through the village. These are the very trees that are used to build the *shaden* the following day, on the 14th of January, using only ropes.

As for my own experiences, I was the first son of my family, so my name was up on one of the lanterns during the festival, back when only the birth of the first grandson of the family was celebrated. When I was 23, I was still ski training in Austria; January is a busy time with important ski races and training. I came back to Nozawa to participate in the Dosojin Matsuri though, as that was my priority. I came away from the Fire Festival with no burns whatsoever. At the time, that was considered quite an embarrassment.

**The festival sounds very intense and busy. What kind of preparation work goes into setting up the Fire Festival every year?**

Preparation for the festival begins in May of the previous year and involves all of the men in the village. The older of the two groups previously mentioned organises all of the age groups below them. In the preparation phase, men will often prioritise the festival over their day jobs. This is considered a given from birth for all men in Nozawa.

The preparations begin with gathering the materials used to build the main towers, called the *shaden*, followed by some tree-cutting and rope-making and much more. All of the





traditional decorations are hand-made each year so it requires a lot of intense labour and time.

We also have a lot of meetings throughout the year that involve a lot of sake drinking. This is when the stories and experiences of the older men that have been through it all are shared with those of us that are going through the preparation process.

**Are visitors outside of Nozawa Onsen allowed to watch and even participate in the Fire Festival? Even foreigners?**

Yes, in non-COVID times the event is open to the public and attracts many foreign and domestic tourists each year. Everyone, including foreigners, is welcome to watch and enjoy the atmosphere but participation is limited to villagers.

**What do you think are a few other things that visitors should know about the Nozawa Onsen Fire Festival and Nozawa Onsen village?**

For those visiting Nozawa Onsen for the Fire Festival, I would recommend coming from the 13th of January to see the build-up to the main event on January 15.

Besides the Fire Festival, skiing and snowboarding are a must in Nozawa Onsen, which has some of the best powder snow in the country.

There are plenty of places to eat and drink in the village, all within walking distance from the ski resort, as well as some cultural spots including the ski museum and shrine.

“Onsen” is the Japanese word for “hot spring” so taking a dip in one of the 13 natural hot springs dotted around the village, all of which are open to the public, is one of the main attractions here.

The spring water in Nozawa is famed for being especially clean and good for drinking. There is a virgin beech tree forest on the mountain that filters the water which comes down to the village for us to drink, cook with, use in the rice fields, and bathe in. The superior quality of our water is also what makes our local sake, Mizuo, so tasty.

I've travelled to many different countries but I can say with confidence that Nozawa is a truly unique and special place.





*Kono Katsuyuki was born in Nozawa Onsen as the oldest of three sons to a ski racing and resort family. He has skied in Alaska, Norway, Iceland, and the European Alps, and he dreams of becoming a professional snowboarder someday. He also enjoys mountain biking, road cycling, fishing, and bouldering in and around his mountain home of Nozawa Onsen. He's currently in charge of running his family's Shikaba hotel, rental shop, and restaurant. His vision for Nozawa Onsen is to make it the world's best mountain resort.*

*Marco Oliveros is a fourth-year ALT and the current Culture Section Editor for CONNECT. He likes history. He lives in Tokushima. He's a little scared of fire, but he looks forward to watching a Japanese fire festival someday.*



Photo: Rachel Fagundes





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# LIFESTYLE

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*"Always borrow money from pessimists. They'll never expect it back."*  
— Kimberly Fitzgerald

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### Samantha Stauch

*"I knew the tension in me between love and power, between pain and rage, and the curious, the grinding way I remained extended between these poles—perpetually attempting to choose the better rather than the worse." — James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time*

## WELLNESS DESIGNER

### Emily Griffith

*"It's fine. Luckily we're all English so no-one's going to ask any questions. Thank you, centuries of emotional repression!"*  
— Mark Corrigan, Peep Show

## SPORT DESIGNER

### Muriah Ellis

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

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### Jon Solmundson

*"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







**D**ylan Wylde has held a variety of ice hockey coaching positions in both Canada and Japan, ranging from youth to collegiate level training. Notably, and a testament to his ability as a player, Dylan has even had the opportunity to practice alongside professional Vancouver Canucks players. You can learn more about his background and experiences in detail on his [website](#).

**Can you tell us about your hockey background and what inspired you to come to Japan?**

Of course! I had an extremely stereotypical Canadian upbringing when it comes to hockey. I've been around the game since as long as I can remember, spanning from my elementary school days to pretty much right up until I left for Japan at the age of 26. Most of my hockey experience however was limited to both coaching and playing domestically within Canada—but I was fortunate to have the game take me to so many places within Canada and the U.S.A. Ironically, coming over to Japan was a completely separate decision away from hockey, and I can't say the two were very much related at all. However, before I moved to Japan to be a part of the JET Programme, I was working primarily as a head goaltender coach for a variety of teams and organizations across Vancouver, British Columbia.

**To my knowledge, hockey is not incredibly popular in Japan relative to other sports like soccer, for example. What kind of hockey community have you been able to join or cultivate here?**

*Japan presently has four professional teams that play in an association called Asia League Ice Hockey—a multinational coalition of Japanese, Korean, and Russian teams. (1) There are also dozens of club teams at the amateur, collegiate, high school, junior high, and elementary school levels. (2)*

Haha, I thought so too! I am still flabbergasted on how I seemingly stumbled upon the hockey world in Japan, specifically because I wasn't really out looking for it too hard due to my Japanese speaking ability (or lack thereof) at the time, and as you mentioned, it being a pretty small community in its own right. With that being said, while the community may be small compared to hockey programs found in Canada, by no means is it lacking in the passion and the commitment-to-growth department. The

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## How One Slipped T the Crack Japanese Comm

Dylan Wylde (Okaya  
Samantha Sta



# in Ice:



## Canadian Through s into the e Hockey community

(Gunma) interviewed by  
uch (Gunma)

hockey world here in Japan is one which is clearly pushing itself to evolve and adapt towards growth within the global community. I would argue that their inclusiveness even rivals what I was seeing back home in Canada—specifically with their commitment to women's and youth hockey. I was able to foster some beautiful relationships and friendships with people that are strong influences in building the game here in Japan.

My first introduction to the community was here in Okayama, where I was able to meet a university student who happened to be a goaltender and connected to the Kurashiki Junior Ice Hockey Club. From there, it just steamrolled into a volunteer position with the Okayama University Ice Hockey Club, and this eventually took me places spanning all over Japan meeting the vast network of players, trainers, coaches, volunteers, parents and clubs that I could have never dreamed even existed within Japan.

### **Are there any major differences between hockey in Japan and in Canada?**

There is one noticeable difference that has never left me and that is the general respect for the game. Hockey in Canada is known to be pretty tough and cutthroat and even downright hostile—something that I believe stems from how passionate fans and participants of the sport can be. In Japan though, whether it was the smaller things like bowing to the crowd, the opposing team, and to the refs before and after a game, or the positivity shown throughout the crowd no matter who was playing, the attitude and the respect shown at all levels of the game within the entire community was something I hope to bring back to Canada. And I felt extremely fortunate to be a part of this during my time in the system here. The general appreciation and respect people have in this community for the game was heartwarming to say the least.

### **On top of working as an ALT for the JET Program, you volunteered for Okayama University as a head goaltender and video review coach. What did a typical day in your life look like?**

Busy, to say the least! When I was working with the University team, I also happened to live about two hours away from the university rink. Since JET was of course a 9-to-5 full-time job, the hockey was



saved for the weekends. Due to the severely limited ice-times for hockey players, we actually didn't gather as a team for practice until around 9 p.m. on Saturday nights. So, for most of the day I would be organizing practice plans, doing video-review, and primarily trying to focus on duties related to goaltending and team management before I took off for the local train into the city. The city I worked for did not allow ALTs to own cars, so I would often be biking with quite a bit of hockey gear on me to the trains, where I would train into the nearest station and be picked up by one of the university players or the other coach I shared the bench with. Then, it was off to the rink. Our practices, alongside the pre- and post-practice meetings, would usually take us until about 1 or 2 a.m. on Sunday mornings where I would then stay the night at a business hotel close to the trains, and then head back home on Sunday morning. It would get pretty exhausting at times, but the experiences and friendships that were made during the last three years with the team were some of the best.

**It is incredibly common for people who play a sport for many years to experience “burnout”—a situation where the athlete is no longer interested in the sport as a result of being excessively fatigued from training. For someone that has been as dedicated and involved as you have, has burnout ever been the case for you?**

A resounding YES. Actually, leaving Canada to join the JET Programme was my solution to “burnout.” At the time, I was working nonstop towards my career ambitions in hockey that were well within sight. I was presented with some opportunities in Canada that, quite frankly, would have solidified my career path for the next decade or so, and yet I was starting to really question whether or not I was following the right path for myself. As many of the people involved in the JET Programme know, there is an impact one can have in a teaching position. While being heavily involved in the growth of players back home in Canada, I thought at that time that if there was any hesitation in my commitment towards the development of others, I absolutely needed to take a step back and re-evaluate my own direction and purpose. The JET Programme seemed to be

the answer to these passions of mine—teaching and personal growth. So, I felt that if I were able to take some time away from my current situation but also continue to hone in and develop related skills linked to teaching, team-work, cooperation, communication and the like, I would have found a happy temporary solution while I pondered my future. And, well . . . the rest is history. Ironical, to say the least! I had left Canada fully expecting to not return to hockey, or at the very least not have hockey be a part of my vernacular for a year or two . . . and look how that turned out! I couldn't be happier with how life decided to unfold from there onwards, though. “We plan, God laughs,” as they say!

**“We  
plan, God  
laughs,” as  
they say!**

**Do you envision hockey becoming more popular in Japan or worldwide?**

Hockey itself is an incredibly tough sport—physically, mentally, and unfortunately, financially. While I would like to be optimistic about the sport I grew up with, the reality is that ice-hockey comes with quite a few hurdles and isn't always accessible compared to other sports

such as soccer or baseball. Still, I think that so long as the game continues to receive support from community members and national/federal organizations, hockey will always have an audience. The uniqueness of the sport in itself has shown to be a catalyst in its own growth, and we're seeing it slowly creep into the mainstream culture all over the globe. Even here within Japan, the rise of things such as social media has fostered enough interest to shine lights on domestic talents — things such as international player scholarships to Japan's own unique branding of ice hockey into manga and anime entertainment! It's an exciting time to be a hockey fan.

**What advice would you give to readers that are interested in becoming more active in joining a sporting community or staying active in Japan?**

Reach out, commit, and expect the unexpected. The rest will work itself out, one way or another. Don't forget to smile along the way.



*Dylan Wylde is an experienced hockey player and coach from North Vancouver, Canada and a former JET Programme ALT placed in Okayama Prefecture. He values flexibility and versatility. He is always chasing something new, on and off the ice.*

*Samantha Stauch is a first-year JET placed in Gunma Prefecture. Originally a general section editor for the CONNECT team, she is now taking on the challenge of sports editor. She has a passion for One Piece, politics, and memes. When she isn't staring at her ceiling after a long day of entertaining elementary and junior high students, you can find her traveling with friends to all the beautiful sights Gunma has to offer.*

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# The Healing Powers of Onsen

Annelise Wilp (Saitama)







You can see the mist in the air and tourists walking around in bathrobes. You can smell the minerals of the bath everywhere. You're definitely in an *onsen* town!

Natural hot springs, or *onsen*, are so loved in Japan that even snow monkeys enjoy them. In the winter, the monkeys at Nagano's Jigokudani Monkey Park take a soak in the *onsen* just like humans do. While it's not recommended that you get in with the monkeys, as an avid *onsen* lover myself, I can't say I wasn't tempted.

**Japan has over 27,000 naturally occurring hot springs** due to its location on the Pacific Ring of Fire, so it's only natural that the history of *onsen* goes back thousands of years. (1) While the exact origin of bathing in *onsen* in Japan is unclear, the hot spring baths of Ehime's Dogo *Onsen*, Wakayama's Shirahama *Onsen*, and Hyogo's Arima *Onsen* are all referenced in the *Nihon Shoki*, which dates back to the 1st century. (2)

My personal history with *onsen*, however, is much more recent. During my first year on the JET Program in 2018, National AJET organized a trip to Shibu *Onsen* in Yudanaka, Nagano. A trip to Jigokudani Monkey Park was also included. *Onsen*, monkeys, and the opportunity to meet other JETs? I signed up right away.

To be honest, it was strange getting naked in front of other women I barely knew, and even weirder with my friends. Stripping down was a bit awkward, but the embarrassment I felt quickly evaporated once I experienced the wonderful sensation of soaking in the *onsen*. Despite my first *onsen* being indoors and super crowded with other female JETs, I found that bathing in an *onsen* is not only physically relaxing but can also be incredibly social. It is definitely a great way to get to know someone! I quickly learned that nakedness is natural, and it does not always have to be sexual.

Since that time, I have been to several different *onsen* towns all around Japan. The best *onsen* I have ever visited was a traditional outdoor bath at Shibu *Onsen* in Nagano prefecture. Shibu *Onsen* has nine public baths, so you can walk around the village in your *yukata* and go "onsen hopping." Nagano is known for its beautiful landscape, and with Shibu *Onsen* being nestled in a valley surrounded by mountains, it is perfect for a relaxing getaway to soothe the soul.

Each of the nine public baths at Shibu *Onsen* is said to have unique properties that heal various ailments. There is a bath that is said to promote healthy delivery of a baby, while another is said to provide perpetual youth and longevity, and yet another will allegedly rid you of acne and give you glowing skin. (3)



# Do onsen possess physical healing powers?

The onsen of Shibu Onsen are not alone in their claim to heal ailments and improve health.

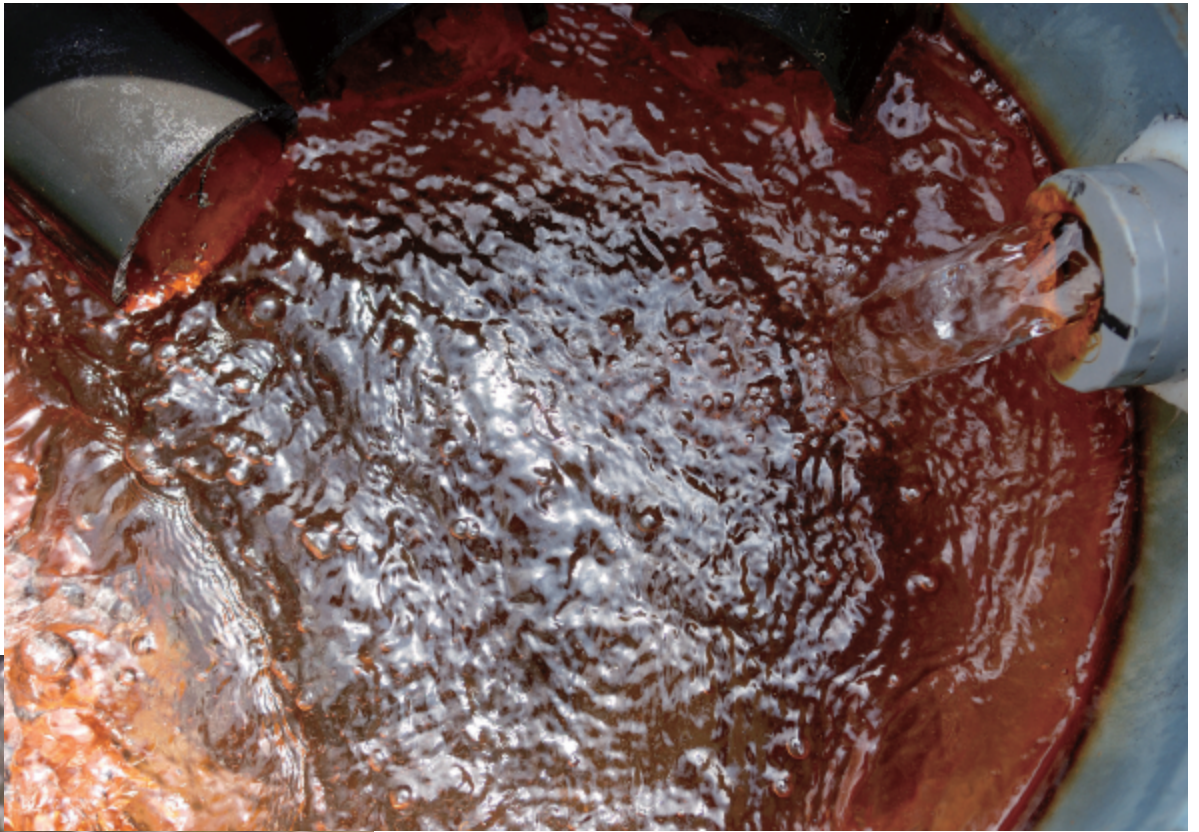
**Onsen have long been thought to have mythical and purifying abilities.** (2) The practice of using an onsen to heal one's body and mind is called "*toji*" in Japanese. (4) In the Edo era, the shogun even had casks of onsen water carried in from Hakone daily so he could partake in *toji*. It was forbidden for the servants to even set the barrels down lest the water spill or cool. (5) While the shogun's methods were extreme, to say the least, there is plenty of scientific evidence to back up the ideas behind *toji*.

Balneology, or the study of health benefits of onsen, is taken so seriously in Japan that there is even an academic society dedicated to it! The Japanese Society of Balneology, Climatology and Physical Medicine publishes studies and offers certification courses to medical doctors looking to learn more about treating their patients with natural onsen therapy. To date, there are 1,006 balneotherapeutic doctors certified by the board.





# ess ng



(6) The society has studied all the different varieties of onsen around Japan and has recorded the health benefits one receives from bathing in or even drinking onsen water.

The health benefits of onsen arise from both psychological and physiological pathways. While the heat and buoyancy created by the water have benefits of their own, perhaps the most alluring component is the effects of various minerals on the body. The legal definition of an onsen requires that at least one of the 19 designated chemicals be naturally present in the water. (1) These chemicals include but are not limited to: sulfur, sodium bicarbonate, carbon dioxide, radon, and iron, all of which have unique benefits of their own. (7)

Photos: Lamune Onsen



• **Carbon dioxide springs** have a red-brown hue, and due to their fizzy and bubbly nature, they feel like you are soaking in soda. They help improve circulation and heal cuts and burns. (8)

**Nagayu Onsen** in Kyūshū's Ōita Prefecture are the most highly carbonated in the nation. One of the springs, Lamune, is nicknamed the "soda pop" hot spring and is even named after the nostalgic soda pop drink *ramune*. (11)



Photo: Lamune Onsen

• **Iron springs**, which have a similar rusty color, are nicknamed "springs for women." They are great for helping with menstrual issues and anemia. (4)

The Kinsen hot springs, or literally "Golden Springs" of **Arima Onsen** in Hyogo Prefecture are legendary for their healing powers. There is even an old Japanese fairy tale about three injured crows that were all healed by bathing in Arima Onsen. (12)

• **Sulfur springs** have a pure white almost milky appearance. These springs are known for the usual benefits such as reducing arteriosclerosis and high blood pressure, but they are also known for their skin beautifying effect. (8)

**Noboribetsu Onsen** is often regarded as one of the best onsen resorts in Hokkaido. The waters in its hot spring baths contain sulfur and hydrogen sulfide, which are both known to have skin softening and lightening effects. The abundance of minerals in the area colors the landscape, giving it the nickname "Hell Valley." (13)



Photo: Tamanoyu Onsen







• **Acidic springs**, which are typically colorless, are good for bacterial infections such as athlete's foot and other dermatological issues. It is said that bathing in an acid spring is similar to a chemical peel. They are also known for improving metabolism. Please note that acidic springs are not recommended for those with sensitive skin. (8)

At a pH of 1.2, the waters of **Tamagawa Onsen** in Akita Prefecture are famous for being the most acidic in Japan. There is even a resident nurse on staff to help the visitors traveling from all around the country to partake in toji.



Photo: Misasa Onsen Tourism Association

• Finally, don't let the “radioactive” name scare you! **Radioactive springs** only have a minute amount of radiation, which doesn't do any harm to the body. In fact, they are known for improving gout, arthralgia, dysautonomia, and plenty of other chronic conditions. These onsen are typically crystal clear in appearance. (8)

**Misasa Onsen** in Tottori Prefecture has a high concentration of radon ions. Radon is a weak radioactive substance produced by the decay of radium and is dispersed in the air. It is said that you can receive health benefits simply from breathing in the air of this onsen town. (14)





Photo: Misasa Onsen Tourism Association

For a full list of which chemicals are proven to affect which ailments, please see the [guide](#) provided by the Japanese Society of Balneology, Climatology and Physical Medicine. Also, like any sort of home-medical remedy, please consult with your doctor prior to using an onsen.



# How to onsen

If you are new to Japan or have yet to experience your first onsen visit, then there are some basic things you should know.

Before entering the onsen, it is important to rinse off first. Getting naked in front of others is embarrassing at first, but it is part of the onsen culture. Going into the water with clothes on will bring the dirt into the water. If you are menstruating, you should refrain from using the onsen, even with tampons.

While rinsing off prior to using an onsen is important, unless using an acidic onsen, it's not necessary to rinse off after your soak. Feel free to leave all those natural minerals on your skin for longer-lasting benefits.

If getting naked still seems impossible to you, there are some baths where you can wear swimsuits. Beppu, one of the most famous onsen towns in Japan, has a mixed bath called Kitahama Onsen where you can wear swimsuits. (9) You can also rent a private onsen in almost any large onsen town.

Japan is still very strict with tattoos in onsen. If you have tattoos, please research whether the onsen you plan to visit allows tattoos. There is a great list of tattoo-friendly onsen [here](#). Most will let you cover your tattoo in the bath, but others do not allow it whatsoever. Please be mindful of the rules because there are few things more embarrassing than being asked to leave while you are trying to enjoy your bath.

Bathing is so routine to us that we don't really pay attention to how other cultures bathe. In Japan, people typically take baths every night, whether it be at home or at a local onsen. And while I was in Japan, I certainly learned to love that aspect of Japanese culture. I suppose I chose to write this article because onsen was one of my favorite things about Japan. It is a great escape, a fun activity to bond with friends, and has plenty of health benefits, both physical and mental. If you haven't gone to an onsen yet, I think you are missing out!

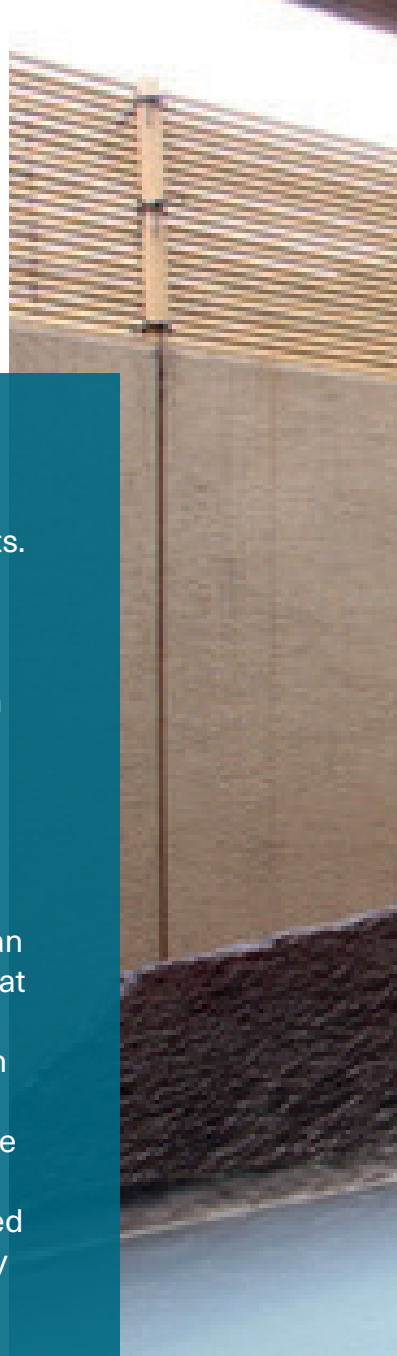






Photo: Tamanoyu Onsen

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*Annelise Wilp participated in the JET Program from 2018-2020 in Warabi, Saitama. She now works with international high school students in the Chicago area, where she lives with her fiancé and their Shiba Inu, Aki.*



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*"I haven't been everywhere, but it's on my list." — Susan Sontag*

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*"Hello, sun in my face. Hello you who made the morning and spread it over the fields . . . Watch, now, how I start the day in happiness, in kindness." — Mary Oliver*

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

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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*



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# BEYOND THE PEAKS

## *Freezing Cool Destinations*

Dahlia Lemelin (Gunma)

One can enjoy Japan all year round with a non-stop carousel of seasonal fun. With spring blooms and cherry blossoms, summer festivals and fall foliage spots, winter is also popular with tourists and domestic travellers, but a lot of the appeal made by agencies and local tourism associations stays focused on renowned ski and onsen resorts. What if winter had more to offer? From smaller snow packed cities to unique cold adventures, here's a list of new destinations to enjoy the fourth season of Japan in any way you want.



## IGLOO DINING AND FAT BIKES

The Japanese Northern Alps area is known worldwide for its numerous slopes and wintery sport villages and is bustling with visitors coming for its many resorts during the cold season. Just north of Nagano, Iiyama City is easily accessible by Shinkansen from all over Honshu. Iiyama usually receives quite an impressive amount of snow, which is perfect for their [Restaurant Kamakura Village](#), where you can experience eating hot pot inside a Japanese igloo!







With a snow park nearby, the whole family can have fun outdoors and finish strong with a warm *Noroshi Nabe*, full of locally sourced ingredients inside the snow dome. The twenty *kamakura* light up at night, making the small group of snow domes look like a wonderland village.

During the day, for those wanting to try a sporty activity other than skiing, the city also offers fat bike guided tours, during which you can ride a wide tire bike on snow and discover the area with a local.







### Kamakura Hot Pot

**Season:** January 21-February 27, 2022

Open every day for three services: Lunch, Afternoon Break, and Dinner.

**Price:** Adults 3700-4200 yen, Children 2400-2800. Includes private kamakura, hot pot kit, ingredients, and a rice ball.

Reservations are necessary and can be made online on their [website](#).

### Fat-Tired Mountain Bike Tour

Get your rental gear and information for tours at the [Shinetsu-Shizenkyo Activity Center](#), conveniently located on the first floor of Iiyama Station.

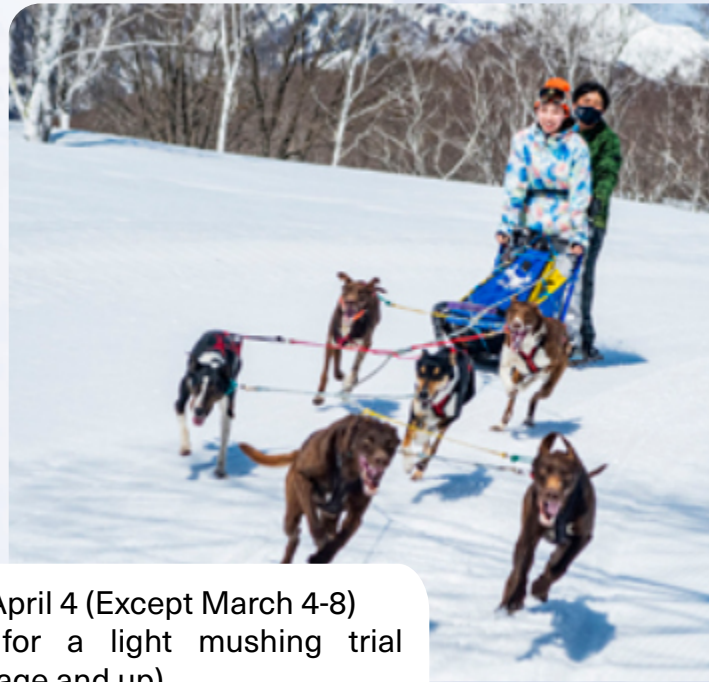
The close-by [Togari Ski Resort](#) also offers the snowbike experience, so non-skiers can follow their friend to the slopes!





## SNOW DOGS AND ICE FISH

Not everyone knows that there are great spots to ski, even in Kanto. Minakami, in Northern Gunma, is a good snowy spot for those looking to escape out of the city to get a taste of true winter only a couple hours away by train. The region is also known for offering the only true dog-sledding experience in Honshu! Beginners and advanced mushers are all welcome at [Minakami Heights](#), where not only dog-sledding, but snow tubing, snowmobiling and snow-shoeing are also offered all winter long, often until the first days of April.



**Season:** January 6-April 4 (Except March 4-8)

**Price:** 9500 yen for a light mushing trial (elementary school age and up)

Light Mushing Plan 18,000 yen (junior high school students and above)

**Qualifications:** Minimum of 2, elementary school students and above, 90kg and under.

**Access:** Go down at Jomo-Kogen Station on the Joetsu Shinkansen line. Some buses leave from Shinjuku and Nerima in Tokyo as well.



While you're in Gunma, you can also take a bus at Maebashi Station up Mount Akagi, where the lake freezes over in late December to allow for some [ice fishing](#). First timers, don't be shy. Rental equipment is available at nearby shops on shore for about 4000 yen per set, and shop owners often will help set you up for your first try at catching *wakasagi*, a small, sardine-sized silver fish that they'll even fry for you for free! Wind is often strong up there, and temperatures are about ten degrees lower than in the city, so dress accordingly. It's a busy cold day in Gunma!





## RELAX AND CHILL WITH BEARS

Gifu is another prefecture that gets quite a bit of snowfall in winter. Of course, the popular traditional village of [Shirakawa-go](#) covered in a white blanket is a must-see for many travellers, but while you're in the area, why not stop and spend some time in Hida-Takayama?



The city has various sake breweries that organize and offer a rally including sake tasting, sticker collecting, and lotteries! Most of the breweries are a walkable distance from Takayama Station in the old traditional district, and you can see the participating shops [here](#). On your way, have a taste of local Hida beef sushi at [Kotte Gyu](#). You won't miss the line up front!





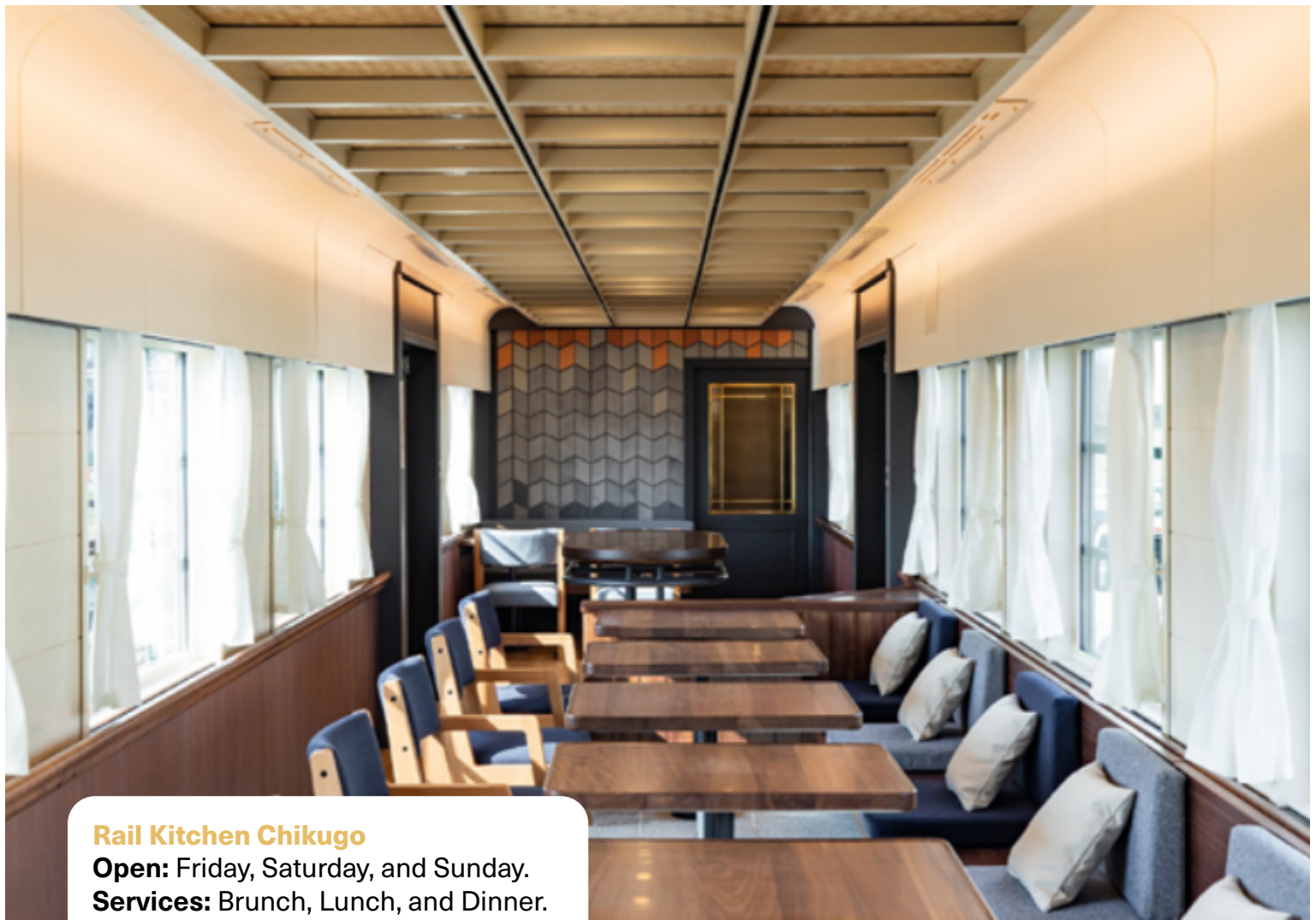
Ready for a small detour out of town? Take a bus headed for Shin-Hotaka Hot Springs and get off for a visit at the [Bear Farm](#). You can feed and observe several bears in an outside natural setting, and even snap a shot with baby bears. Not too far is the beautiful double-decker [Shin-Hotaka Ropeway](#) which you can ride up to their observation deck to see and appreciate the Alps in all their splendor while sipping a cup of coffee. For all winter, residents of Gifu, Nagano, Toyama, and Ishikawa prefectures can even get a [discount](#) for riding the ropeway!



## RIDE THE RESTAURANT IN KYUSHU

If you aren't a fan of snow, you can still enjoy winter travel. The weather is usually milder in the southeast of the country, and gourmet enthusiasts won't be left out this cold season, as an exciting adventure awaits in Fukuoka. One of a handful of railways-related gourmet experiences takes place on the [Rail Kitchen Chikugo](#), a train restaurant that offers a menu using local ingredients of the rural regions you'll be traveling through during your meal. Fully equipped with 52 seats and an open kitchen in the central car, it feels as if you're sitting in a warm inviting regular establishment. Running mostly on Fridays and weekends, the exclusive feel of that special meal is sure to please foodies and train enthusiasts alike. During your visit, take your time to see the areas at both ends of the train line. Stay warm by stepping foot at [Tenjin Yunohana](#) Hot Springs, or strolling the seafood restaurants of Miike Port in Omuta.





### **Rail Kitchen Chikugo**

**Open:** Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

**Services:** Brunch, Lunch, and Dinner.

**Price:** 3300 yen for brunch, and 8800 yen for both lunch and dinner.

Please make a reservation on their [website](#) (Japanese only).







While in Fukuoka, why not visit [Nokonoshima](#)? Accessible by bus, car, or a short ferry ride out of the Meinohama Port, the large park gives visitors great views over the bay and Fukuoka City in all seasons. Their large flower park blooms even in winter, with camellias, narcissus and oxalis covering the wide hills overlooking the water. Take advantage of the cool weather to enjoy the outdoors out of the city in Kyushu.

Photos kindly provided by:  
[Shinshu-Iiyama Tourism Bureau](#)  
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[Akagi Shizen Juku — Akagi-Trip](#)  
[Takayama City Domestic Tourism Division](#)  
[Shin-Hotaka Ropeway — Okuhi Tourism Development](#)  
[West Japan Railways “Rail Kitchen Chikugo”](#)  
[Nokonoshima Island Park](#)





## SNOW? NOT FOR ME! WARM WINTER IN OKINAWA

Okinawa has mild weather and warm days during the first months of the year as well, so a trip down south is a good option for warmth seekers. The beach might be too chilly for a dip, but there's more to do on the southern islands!

The popular Okinawa World Park has too many activities offered to tour in one day, but some are worth the time. The park is home to the [Gyuokusendo Cave](#), a 900 meters-long limestone cave with blue waters and illuminated ceiling spears open to visitors rain or shine.

The warm weather also allows for fruit to grow all year long, so you can take a rest at the park's orchards and taste a variety of drinks and snacks made of the freshly picked fruits.

You can keep even warmer at the [Ryuku Glass Village](#), where you can try your hands at glass blowing, fiery kilns surrounding you with burning heat.

Many more activities, both outdoors and indoors, are waiting for you in the Ryukyu Islands this winter, so why not visit and warm your cold heart?



*Dahlia is the travel editor for **CONNECT** Magazine, and a fourth-year JET in Gunma Prefecture who adores winter and loves to drive several hours to find a few snowflakes on her way.*



# Building Community Through Agricultural Exchange

Sierra Nelson-Liner (Shizuoka)





The sliding door to the flower shop opened one last time. My flower arranging teacher told me to wait for her sister to give me a large bag. I was happily surprised to find it packed full of *mikan*, or satsuma mandarins. The winter fruit season had begun!

In Japan, it is common to receive *omiyage* which means “souvenir” or “gift”. Usually these range from snacks such as cookies or crackers, to small handicrafts. In the winter, it is not uncommon to be handed a small *mikan* that had been tucked away into a bag or pocket. *Mikan* are one of the cutest gifts I have ever received, and always seem to bring smiles to people’s faces when they receive them.

Japan is well known for this seasonal fruit. A typical scene in winter is sitting under a heated table, known as a *kotatsu*, peeling *mikan*. To promote this activity there was even a book written on how to [peel the mikan skin into art](#). (1) Currently, Wakayama, Ehime, and Shizuoka prefectures are Japan’s top *mikan* producers. (2) Mikkabi, a town in Shizuoka, is especially famous

for this sweet and juicy fruit. (3) I have always wanted to harvest the *mikan* myself. Luckily enough, this last December, I finally made the connection to do just that.

Early Sunday morning, I was picked up by my new friend Marin to go on an adventure for the day. It was the first time we met, but we quickly realized that we had a lot in common as we were both excited to harvest *mikan* and connect back to nature. When we reached Mikkabi, we were astounded by the number of *mikan* trees and their natural beauty.

We were warmly welcomed to the local farm, Kawabe. There, we transferred to a mini pickup truck to travel up the mountain. The *mikan* fields were terraced into the mountainside. Winding through switchbacks, a blur of dark green with circles of bright orange flew past the car’s windows. Each orchard was bursting with fruit. The *wase mikan*, or early *mikan*, were definitely ready to harvest! Stepping out of the car we put the baskets over our shoulder, grabbed some scissors, and set out to work.





People of all ages were picking mikan. There were little children crawling through the lower branches as well as elderly men and women standing on silver ladders to reach the tops of the trees. The process became meditative. Leaning into the trees. Weaving through the branches to pull out the mikan. Standing on ladders or upon the center trunk. Reaching for the last mikan at the top. We lost ourselves in the orchard and were connecting to a seasonal tradition.

This style of mikan picking was by hand with small scissors. You hold the mikan in your grasp and cut it once from the tree. Then you cut near the base of the stem to make it a flat surface. Finally, you place it into the basket on your back. They were heavier than I expected, so I frequently poured them into a newspaper-lined box to be transported out of the orchard.

At first, the task of picking all of the mikan from one tree seemed daunting, but I quickly realized that it was a community effort. When I stepped away to pour out my full basket of mikan, another person stepped in. We all criss-crossed through the trees, until the rows were picked and the

oranges placed into cartons to be carried down the mountain.

During our short breaks, we would pick a mikan right from the tree, peel it open to eat, and take a step back to appreciate the scenery. The sky was clear enough to see Lakes Irohana and Hamana. Just past lake Hamana on the horizon, was the Pacific Ocean. It was the perfect backdrop. The dark green leaves of the mikan trees, the sun-kissed, stunningly orange fruit, and the blues of the water and sky. They all wove together to create the most memorable mikan-picking morning.

After a few hours, we stopped to take a longer rest. The plastic boxes were flipped over to make tables and chairs. They were arranged in a large circle, with some in the center to support kettles of tea and coffee. We passed around the drinks and snacks. We had all worked hard, and were happy to share this seasonal experience.

My new friend, Marin, has been able to summarize the positivity from this day in her own words.



"I am always surrounded by artificial devices in both my private and work life. When I went mikan picking, I was reminded of what it was like to go into nature. It is important for me to feel that connection. I loved picking mikan right from the tree. Touching it with my hands and eating it right there in the orchard.

Naturally, I am not good at communicating with people. Especially people that I meet for the first time. But my fears of communicating completely ceased after my experience. I noticed that it was very fun to meet new people by doing an agricultural activity. I learned that I can create community and connect to others easier in a nature-inspired environment. This is a new discovery in my life. By living like this, we can give nature a voice. Just like nature gave me the opportunity to find my voice. I feel so happy in my heart to make new friends through this experience. Thank you.

—Marin Hirokawa

If you live near Hamamatsu City, [here](#) is the website for information regarding mikan picking in the area. Thank you for taking the time to read about connecting back to nature through agriculture. I hope many of you get to experience seasonal farming throughout Japan, and take this positive energy into the new year.

Sources:

1. [Japan Today](#) "Japanese Book Encourages you to Make Art Out of Orange Peels"
2. [Tokyo Weekender](#) "The Kyushu Mikan: A Sour-Sweet Sliver of History"
3. [Mika Chan Farm](#)

*Sierra Nelson-Liner is a third-year ALT who is the Community Editor for **CONNECT** Magazine. She enjoys catching sunsets and putting flowers in her hair. She hopes to learn more about [cultural exchange through farming](#) in this new year.*





# CONTRIBUTING TO CONNECT

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

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

## ARTICLES

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

## SPOTLIGHT

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

## PHOTOS

Members of the JET community contributed to the photos you see in this issue. If you're an aspiring photographer and want your work published, please get in contact with the lead designer, Lloyd Cruickshank, at [visualmedia.connect@ajet.net](mailto:visualmedia.connect@ajet.net).

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