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hyogo times

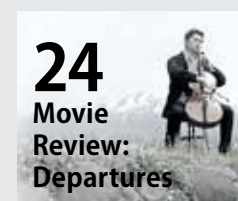
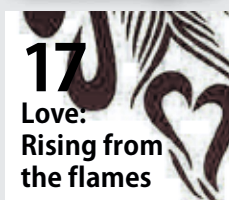
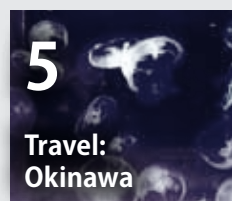
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Biking Biwa



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All JETs in Hyogo are encouraged to send in articles, musings, poetry, prose and any ideas to improve the Hyogo Times for the betterment of the Hyogo JET community. Submit by the 15th of each month to: publications@hyogo.ajet.net



Message from the Editor

April arrives and that means the new school year;

new faces appearing in the staff room, students in slightly too big uniforms highlighting their status as newbies, and a new timetable to get your head around. Slowly but surely you realize that it really is time to put away the kotatsu blanket and that you're going to have to buy a new pair of shoes for work because the only 'rain' shoes you have are boots – not practical when you're not wearing indoor shoes in the temporary staffroom (and hey – new shoes excuse!). It also means that Golden Week is just around the corner, no doubt heralding a slew of 'I know it's the middle of the school week and I have classes, but can I take Tues-Thursday off please' requests in staffrooms across Japan. I always felt a little bit evil doing that, but it's just so nenkyuu-efficient for travel purposes! Oh the precious, precious nenkyuu...

Sorry, I got slightly distracted there.

Getting distracted by things is something that unfortunately happened a lot in the latter half of March. I'm really, really looking forward to classes starting up again so that I have structure back in my days. I do not do well with free time and should have been far more productive than I actually was. It's difficult when you don't know what classes you'll be teaching/who you're teaching with. In previous years I've got on with the lesson planning anyway, but since I'll be leaving in the

summer and have no idea what experience (if any) my successor will have, I thought it would be a plan to encourage more JTE-driven lesson planning than let-the-ALT-do-everything lesson planning. I'll have to see how it goes and report back.

Yet through this turbulent time of change and renewal, the Hyogo Times soldiers on! Read on to be transported to Okinawa, fly around Lake Biwa (well, mooch along at least) and continue your spiritual journey in Osaka as the Kannon pilgrimage reaches Fujidera. If you've ever wondered what goes into tamagoyaki to make it so tasty, head to the Kicchiri Kitchen for all the details. If you buy the eggs from a local source as per Miso Green's suggestion you'll be well on your way to having a HT-tastic time. As it's the start of the school year, there will no doubt be meetings you aren't invited to, so take over the empty staffroom, listen to the radio without headphones, and read on.

Oh, and enjoy the last of the cherry blossom and themed seasonal goods (I at least will miss the Mister Donut sakura selection).

Qmi

Message from the PR

Spring break and temperamental

weather abound. In infuriatingly obsolete, but certainly more interesting terms, we transition from yayoi (no, not yaoi you deviants, 弥生 – new life) to uzuki (卯月) and most of us can relax with the lull at work and enjoy hanami (花見 – flower viewing).

Hanami is an event so mysterious that the closest thing WolframAlpha knows to it is **5777 Hanaki** – a minor planet just 23 light minutes from Earth. Fortunately we can experience the secrets of the ancient ritual of hanami by following the vast crowds of people who flock to scenic areas. People then proceed to picnic on a tarpaulin which has been set down earlier that day (or even the night before, but many public areas do not allow this) to lay claim to the preferred area. More rebellious groups will have a barbeque set up (usually not allowed, or at least

considered uncouth) and many people will break out some traditional sake, but beer is becoming increasingly popular for this event. When you have acquired a space to settle down for a picnic you can relax and enjoy your meal while being pelted by a potential blizzard of falling organic material. Hanami kicks off in Kansai near the end of March, but varies with the weather. There will be an AJET hanami event on 7th April. We will meet at Sumaura Koen station at 11am. Please see the Hyogo AJET Facebook page for details.

As alternatives for those who are less inclined to endure びみびみ (the crowds), there is yozakura (夜桜) – night sakura viewing. Many popular areas will set up lighting during hanami season. For the more adventurous, consider driving or hiking to a more secluded

spot – one of my favourite locations is up the hiking paths near Minoo waterfall in Osaka. Also great, but already over for this year is umemi (梅見) – plum blossom viewing (traditionally more popular than sakura viewing, but now certainly less crowded).

April 1st is the beginning of the Japanese fiscal year, so this is when a lot of changes will be happening at businesses and schools. More relevant for most of us, this period is when we will be meeting enthusiastic and alert new students. This provides us with the engaging task of spending hours making custom flash cards of student photos with their names. Enjoy the flourishing life and change this season brings and I hope everyone has a fun haru (春 – spring)!

Henry Ashley Cooper

*Okinawa**

Experiencing Okinawa's double life

At the start of February I

dragged my hands from under the **kotatsu** just long enough to click 'buy' on flights to Okinawa as a congratulations to myself for surviving my first Japanese January. I have just returned from said weekend bringing the sun with me (you're welcome) and thought it only fair to share the experience so you can defrost vicariously through my sunny weekend... oh alright, you got me, I fully intend to gloat, but hopefully it will serve as inspiration for your own island adventures.

KIX to Naha is a very easy two hour flight, and with just a ten minute (¥1,200) taxi from the airport to downtown Naha you can catch the evening flight after school and be on Naha's main drag, Kokusai-dori, in perfect time to guzzle down some taco-rice before moving onto the main city's bars and clubs to sample the indigenous and dangerous **awamori** liquor. There are plenty

of budget places to stay in Naha, many around Kokusai-dori, but we were very pleased with Osaru-no Oyado Monkey's Inn which was a stone's throw from Tomari port, and a fifteen minute walk from Kokusai-dori. Not only a great location, but a steal at ¥1,500 a night, and the charming proprietor from Osaka will give you a lift back to the airport for ¥1,000 whilst regaling you with tales of jet-skiing from Nishinomiya to Suma beach!

Day 1

After hitting Naha's late night haunts upon arrival and playing a lot of ping pong in one bar, our first full day needed to be suitably relaxing. Tokashiki Island is a tropical paradise just 35 minutes by high-speed ferry from Tomari wharf. If you decide to stay on the island your accommodation will pick you up from the terminal; for day trippers there's a shuttle bus to the beautiful Aharen beach area,

or if you want to explore more of the island then you can rent a car or scooter (don't rent a bicycle unless you want a very good work out). We opted for the lazy option and hopped on the ten minute bus which zipped through the mountainous spine of the island and deposited us in sleepy Aharen village. The driver gave us the choice of a 3 or 4:30pm return once he had pointed out the one konbini and restaurant which may or may not have been open for business that day... We certainly weren't in Kansai anymore.

Incredibly popular in summer, at the beginning of March, Aharen was almost deserted, with only crowds of friendly stray cats and a few other day trippers to keep us company.

We spent the morning scrambling across the headland, struggling to imagine the horrors of invasion that this idyll faced not so long

ago, before discovering a second, smaller, pebbly beach where young and old alike can while away the hours collecting shells and corals or poke around in the rock pools.

Beachcombing is hungry work and once our pockets were bulging with seashells we returned to the village, praying for the one shack-like restaurant to be open. Not only was it open, but the shabby exterior hid a truly excellent beach café serving up fresh local sashimi, Okinawa soba and perfect karaage. The local Orion beer to wash down the meal gave our lunch that real holiday feeling and was probably somewhat to blame for our post lunch dip in the clear turquoise waters. The water was incredibly clear and certainly warm enough for Brits used to the North Sea, but not for the locals who wait till the warmer months to snorkel and dive in the bay.

Day 2

All sporting minor sun burn, we designated Saturday as a day of culture and main island exploration. We picked up a car from OTS rental at Tomari wharf (it would come to just under ¥10,000 between three for two days, including petrol and tolls) and headed south. The Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial Park is the largest war memorial in Okinawa. It includes a museum whose exhibits cover Okinawa's pre-war history, the Battle of Okinawa and post-war Okinawa under U.S. military occupation. The museum is very informative and presents a balanced view on Okinawa's transformation from Ryukyu Kingdom, through devastating war, to the cultural mélange it is today. You walk through the exhibits and learn chronologically about Okinawa's complex relationship with both mainland Japan and the international community, before the facts of the

Battle of Okinawa are presented along with photo evidence. In the age of the image one might argue that we have become inured to war, and although the photographs in the museum were harrowing, it wasn't until the penultimate exhibition that the horror of what happened on the islands really hit home. The exhibit in question was a large room filled with written accounts of Okinawan civilians who survived the battle. Reading about such tragedy, written so frankly, was incredibly moving. Outside the museum is the Cornerstone of Peace monument, inscribed with over two hundred and forty thousand names – those who lost their lives in the Battle of Okinawa. The Memorial Park is definitely worth a visit. Its position is incredibly peaceful and walking through the Cornerstone of Peace you reach the cliff edge, look out to sea and ponder the future of Japan.



*continued

On the southern tip of the main island there are lots of things to see. The Ryukyu glass factory comes highly recommended, as does Okinawa World if you have young children. We went to the Gangala caves and forest opposite Okinawa world (about 15 minutes drive from the Peace Park), unfortunately we hadn't reserved a time slot to see the caves (including one particularly renowned stalactite) but it was very pleasant to escape the sun and have lunch in the unusual cave café, umbrellas protecting us from stalactite drips.

By this point, having touched on both history and nature, it was time for some modern culture. A little north of Naha is the American Village. I promise we aren't so bored of Japan that we wanted escape; one of our party was on a mission to find solo cups. Sadly we failed, but if you do want to be transported to America, the Village is reminiscent of San Francisco's pier 39.

Before we could succumb to reverse culture shock we got back on the road to the northern city of Nago. From Naha the expressway provides really easy access to the north, but if you have a little more time then west coast route 58 is much more picturesque. We arrived in Nago in the early evening and checked into hostel Yanbaru

Fukaro, about 2km from the centre of town and five minutes from the beach. It was slightly like staying in someone's spare room, but a very large airy spare room with comfortable futons and a delightful lack of bunk beds.

From my brief visit I don't think Nago city itself is worth much time, but it's a great location to explore the north of the main island. We began said exploration by experiencing the other side of island life... Enter the Marines.

Okinawa's relationship with US armed forces is a tempestuous one. I don't know enough about the situation to either condone or condemn the military presence, but the officers I met in Nagano over New Year made the most gentlemanly tour guides when we turned up in their stomping ground. After introducing us to the local steak house in central Nago, (Asuka ステーキハウス飛鳥) where we enjoyed a truly excellent four course dinner for ¥2,000, we were offered a tour of the local base. Never ones to say no to a new experience (or turn down a free lift) we bundled into the car and whizzed up to the affectionately nicknamed 'Man Camp', so called for the 4000:12 male to female ratio. Now this may not seem the most sensible decision considering recent altercations down in Okinawa, but

having failed to find solo cups in the American Village what choice did we have?

The base was a stark contrast to the rest of the island, with wide spaces and purpose built barracks. It was a far cry from Okinawa's own ramshackle style. Situated right on the beach, with one sandy strip for drills and another for relaxation the boys have a nice set up. But despite the idyllic location and offices which are not so different from my staff room, the fleet of Humvees and aquatic equipment quickly reminded us where we were. Finally, with some trepidation, we went to the base's bar. We might have felt uncomfortable being the only girls in a room full of testosterone and muscle, but fortunately, living in Japan we've become accustomed to stares, and so barely noticed the attention our entrance drew. Instead we were able to enjoy seeing the marines in their element: line-dancing. Not two things I would have naturally put together, but with an 11pm curfew the lads are limited to what the one DJ chooses to play. Still, the dance floor was packed and everyone was having fun. Although no amount of cajoling from our friends would succeed in getting us down on the dance floor, we did learn 'the Cupid shuffle' from our raised vantage point and will be bringing it to a Kansai club near you soon.

From one marine life to another; our third cloud-free 28°C morning on Sunday took us to Churaumi Aquarium. Famous for its three huge whale sharks I recommend grabbing a bite to eat in the café next to the main tank and letting the sharks and manta rays hypnotize you as they swim round (just don't assume there'll be appropriate breakfast food). Afterwards wander the area between the aquarium building and the sea where you can find lots to admire, including a turtle nesting zone. There are several demonstration shows across the aquarium but the best of these has to be the dolphin show, a winner for all ages.

Once you've had your fill of aquatic life and posing with the impressive floral replicas, head one kilometre along the coast to Bise, a tiny coastal village whose paths become emerald tunnels as the sun shines through the canopies of the fukugi trees lining each walkway. Overshadowed by the neighbouring aquarium as a tourist attraction, Bise is a perfect escape from the tourist hustle and bustle. We happened upon a cafe with the most spectacular ocean view, and that's saying something in Okinawa! Cahaya Bulan Cafe serves up cakes galore, an impressive selection of fruit smoothies and juices, a delicious Okinawa soba set and truly exquisite Vietnamese

coffee. Although we'd eaten in a cave and an aquarium, this seaside cafe was my favourite; the perfect place to relax after a solid three days of tourism.

Exhausted and very contented, we bade farewell to the Marines and marina and headed back to Naha for the final night. Upon recommendation we went to Yazaemon (やざえもん) on Kokusai-dori for delicious sushi. Although we had to wait a while to be seated, the restaurant had a friendly atmosphere and really won our hearts with the restaurant game of janken. I came third, but the head chef took pity and served me up a special plate of tuna as a conciliatory prize. It was so good I then ordered two more, an excellent marketing ploy! After dinner it was time for omiyage shopping and one last tasty Blue Seal ice-cream before hitting the hay. On Monday we said our final goodbyes to the tropics and boarded the plane back to the cold, but Okinawa hadn't stopped giving yet... as the plane ascended and I looked wistfully down at the blue water below, two humpback whales leapt out of the sea. As they re-entered the water their huge tails splashed one last farewell.

Priceless.

Charlotte Griffiths

Tell me more!

- [Yanbaru Fukaro Hostel, Nago](#)
- [Churaumi Aquarium](#)
- [Cahaya Bulan Cafe](#)



Hanami Time!

It's April and that means the brief, but beautiful cherry blossom season. The sales of blue tarpaulins are set to sky rocket and public intoxication in the middle of the day will reach giddy new heights. Whether it's your first, final or other, 花見 season in Japan, Hyogo has a positive cornucopia of great spots to ponder the brevity of life. Here's a few to consider:

夙川公園 *Shukugawa Park*

Whilst not the largest collection in Hyogo, the 2300 cherry trees lining the Shukugawa in Nishinomiya makes for a pretty good 花見 spot. The easy access is an added bonus, with stations on the Hankyu, Hanshin and JR lines. The 2.7km stretch of river is touted as one of the best in the prefecture. I suppose there's nothing quite like the river/cherry tree combination.

ACCESS

Hankyu: 夙川 (Shukugawa) or 苦楽園口 (Kurakuenguchi)

Hanshin: 香櫨園 (Koroen)

JR: さくら夙川 (Sakurashukugawa)

篠山城 *Sasayama Castle ruins*

Am I going to plug my own town's blossoms? Yes, yes I am. Around 1,000 trees litter the relatively small castle grounds in Sasayama and over the sakura season, you're permitted to eat and drink on the castle mound. Combine this with a black bean ice cream when wandering around the rest of the town, and it's a nice trip to the countryside.

ACCESS

JR 福知山線 (Fukuchiyama line) to 篠山口 (Sasayamaguchi). From the station, you can get a bus to the centre of town, or rent a bike (¥500 per day) at the station and have a cycle around too (it's pretty flat, and they even have electric-assist bikes if you're feeling very, very lazy).

城崎温泉 *Kinosaki Onsen*

If you fancy completely Japaning out, why not combine 花見 season and 温泉 going with a trip to Kinosakionsen. The trees lining the river are lit with paper lanterns overnight, so consider a late departure/overnight stay in one of the ryokan dotted around town.

ACCESS

JR 山陰線 (San-in line) to 城崎温泉 or the Zentan express bus.

明石公園 *Akashi Park*

Along with Shukugawa, Akashi Park is officially a Good Cherry Viewing Place – it was selected as one of the top 100 spots in Japan to get your hanami on. The castle ruins and lake setting make this a beautiful place to lounge around and have a tippie or two.

ACCESS

JR: Take the 神戸線 (Kobe line) to 明石 (Akashi)

Sanyo: 山陽明石 (Sanyo Akashi).

竹田城跡 *Takeda Castle Ruins*

Whether you want to look at cherry trees or not, the Takeda castle ruins in 朝来市 (Asago) are well worth a visit. A little bit more difficult to get to by public transport than some of the other locations, the sight of this castle rising over the surrounding countryside is a wonder in itself – the 桜 an added bonus.

ACCESS

JR 播但線 (Bantan line) and walk.

Omogen Custance

Another way to make your time under the trees that little bit more special is to make it into a random dress-up event! At the suggestion of one of my Australian friends, a (rather large) group of us decided to have a Lolita-themed, teddy-bear's picnic-esque 花見. If you're okay with completely justified odd looks, give it a go – it was a blast!

The Hyogo Local Grocers Project

Once, a few years ago, another friend of the eco-friendly prerogative asked me which I would rather pay for, organic food or local food. My instant reaction was to say local. When comparing the carbon footprints of organic food that was transported from a far-off place to local food grown using non-natural fertilizers and insecticides, they probably equal out. But local food sends the better message: it supports the local economy and establishes an appreciation for eating seasonal and truly fresh foods.

But while I can **say** I'd buy local first, I'm not a stickler about it for two reasons. First off, some locales are not ideal for growing certain foods. Living in Alaska for two years before moving to Japan, I was only provided with local berries and game meat, not the greatest options for a well-rounded diet, let alone a vegetarian's. Needless to say, the majority of what I ate was shipped from the other side of the planet. No roads came in or out of my town, and I feared the day when a barge wouldn't show up for some reason and I'd starve to death.

The other problem is that I was a picky eater growing up, and only upon starting college did I begin to experiment with new flavors and cuisines beyond the typical American finicky-kid diet of grilled cheese and spaghetti. I had never eaten an olive before I was 24. Today, I can mindlessly polish off a jar in a matter of minutes. My mind still craves this variety.

Therefore, while many jars of Spanish olives and blocks of American cheese are likely to appear in my future in this country, I can still buy the majority of my groceries locally. I am lucky to live in semi-rural Aioi, for it is full of farming families that pack the local farmer's market with stuff from their backyards. Not just that, but I can also procure locally-produced ice cream, tofu, honey, noodles, and so much more. Slowly I'm learning the beauty of eating and cooking seasonally, and the many detriments that come along with buying foods from unknown or far-off sources.

Many JETs have told me about their woes in trying to find local produce. The truth is, it's EVERYWHERE, but there are a slew of terms to wade through before you can even know where to search for local foods. First, let's talk about package labeling.

Here are terms that concern hippie-folk:

遺伝子組み換えでない (idenshi kumikae denai)

Non-GMO: Unlike in the US, there are regulations regarding the labeling of foods that utilize genetically-modified ingredients in Japan. If a product contains more than 5% total mass of ingredients derived from genetically-modified crops, Japanese law requires that information to be noted on the label. However, most foods that don't utilize GM ingredients voluntarily specify so, using the term above, in their ingredients lists to make their products appealing. The most common GMOs used in food products are corn, canola, and soybeans. If, next to these foods in the ingredients list, the product doesn't specify one way or the other, one might assume that between 0 and 5% of the ingredients comes from genetically-modified sources, though this rule of thumb probably applies to more widely commercially produced goods than it does to goods from your local farmer.



無添加 (mutenka)

No additives: This is usually included on the labeling of processed foods, such as miso, that do not use any artificial additives or preservatives.

有機 (yūki) / オーガニック

Organic: The kanji term is slightly more common. When you buy from a farmer, it's important to remember that you are not necessarily buying organic food. There is great interest in Japan in permaculture and sustainability, and many farmers utilize these techniques to minimize their pesticide and fertilizer usage, but are keeping things so small that there is little point in getting organic-certified. I'm willing to trust what my genki elderly neighbors are eating. Here are more specific terms to look for instead:

無農薬 (munōyaku)

No pesticides: This probably means that farmers use natural means to keep their plants

pest-free, perhaps by using soaps as pesticides or keeping ducks in their rice paddies to keep the insect population down.

有機肥料 (yūki hiryō)

Organic fertilizers: Many markets will also proudly tout their use of EM (aka bokashi) as a fertilizing agent!

Now that you are familiar with what types of food to look for, let's introduce the myriad types of marketplaces for purchasing local groceries!

ファーマーズ・マーケット

Farmer's Market: Really, this is a catch-all term that probably won't lead you to the kind of farmer's market you're looking for (some offer the exact opposite of regionally grown food, in fact). In searching or asking around, try one of the following terms instead:

特産品店 (tokusanshōten)

Specialty Shops: Specialty shops typically sell all kinds of 名物, or famed goods, from your area. They might range from souvenir shops to grocery stores to seafood markets, and likewise fluctuate in price, but they are guaranteed to carry products that have been produced locally.

朝市 (asaichi)

Morning Market: As the name suggests, these are produce markets that operate for half-days or less. While they typically carry quality fruits and veggies, and the person that pulled them out of the ground will likely be the person you hand your money to, morning markets usually operate on irregular days and, even on weekends, are often too early for JET-folk to make it to.

インショップ

In-Shop vendors: Especially in larger cities, one can't expect to find stores entirely dedicated to local foods. As a result, there are

だし巻き卵 Japanese Omelet

This omelet is *delicious, easy to make and can be eaten for breakfast, lunch or dinner.*

*continued

many areas that have "in-shops," where local sellers can corner off their goods for purchase. In Hyogo, we can find many in-shops in A-Coops (the JA-run supermarket) as well as some MaxValus in the Kobe area, and the occasional department store. Goods from in-shop vendors are rather inconsistent: some carry local specialty products while others focus on produce, but either way, they're probably worth a browse!

直売所 (chokubaisho)

Farmer-Direct Sellers: If you're looking for local produce as well as locally produced packaged foods, a **chokubaisho** is probably your best bet. These places purchase products directly from farmers and sell them en masse in one large store without the price hikes caused by distributors. Chokubaisho are everywhere, but you can often find them attached to these two terms:

JAグループ: Central Union of Agriculture Cooperatives:

This is the major agricultural organization of Japan. It doesn't seem to be a union, but it does have many area-specific chapters that farmers pay dues towards to promote local agriculture. These local JA chapters organize many of the chokubaisho in Hyogo.

道の駅 (michi no eki)

Rest stops: The network of highway rest stops in Hyogo also serve as chokubaisho, although many carry primarily packaged local goods. My nearest michi no eki is the primary greengrocer for my household.

After researching all of this, I've decided to create a map with English information, called "**The Hyogo Local Grocers Project,**" based on the information I could find in **Japanese**. However, as much as I'd enjoy researching and reviewing these markets in English, wouldn't it defeat the

purpose to visit markets out of my own area? Here's a compromise: I'll check out and report about the markets near me if you do the same. I'd love to start featuring especially impressive markets in this column, as well as update the map with English reviews and more specific basic information, so if you find anything especially interesting, drop a line with your thoughts on it!

Uluwehi Mills

miso.green.ht@gmail.com

Ingredients

Serves 4 as a side dish

- 6 eggs
- 1 cup **dashi** (stock made from fish and kelp, you can buy sachets of instant dashi)
- 2 tablespoons light soy sauce (**usukuchi shoyu**)
- 1 tablespoon mirin
- salad oil
- salt
- grated daikon and soy sauce to serve

Step one

Put eggs, dashi, light soy sauce, mirin and a pinch of salt into a bowl and mix well.

Step two

Put a little salad oil into a heated fry pan, or if you have one, a rectangular pan.

Step three

Put a little of the egg mixture into the pan, just enough to cover the bottom.

Step four

Once almost cooked, roll the egg mixture to one end of the pan.

Step five

Add a little more egg mixture and once that's almost cooked, roll the previously cooked egg back over it before moving the now combined roll back to the end of the pan.

Step six

Repeat the process three or four times to make many layers.

Step seven

Once cooked, remove from the pan and slice into 3 cm thick slices.

Step eight

Serve with grated daikon and soy sauce to taste.

Lauren McRae

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5

Kibidango 吉備団子

In this post I shall be introducing

Kibidango 吉備団子. Now I'm well aware that dango and mochi aren't exactly the same thing, but they are both made from mochiko (糯粉; rice flour) and I'd like this segment to cover a wide array of omiyage and traditional Japanese sweets!

Residents claim that Okayama was the original setting of the Japanese fairytale 'Momotarō' and subsequently named its main street **Momotarō-Odōri** in the Peach Boy's honor. The Okayama Momotarō Festival is held annually in August for three days. According to locals the story was based on the legend of Prince Kibitsuhiko's battle against the ogre Ura, who is said to have lived in Kino-jo (Demon's Castle) in the area around Soja 総社. In the fairytale, Momotarō is given kibidango on his journey to defeat Ura, and so they are **the** omiyage to bring back from Okayama.

I was originally introduced to these little delights soon after I arrived in Japan. Along with the other recently appointed JETs, we had to make a Japanese language presentation (to show our BoE we were learning and stuff). We decided upon the story of Momotarō, so imagine our surprise when our teacher handed over a box of kibidango, fresh from Okayama, to assist in our production!

So onto the actual kibidango. The box that sensei presented us with is surely the most intricately packaged omiyage I have ever set eyes upon, the outer art detailing the characters of the Momotarō tale in a cute, childish, watercolour kind of style.

Upon opening the box there was a little card with similar artwork to the exterior upon which was written the Momotarō story. The kibidango

themselves were each individually wrapped in little wax paper balls with one character from the fable printed on each. Now prior to tasting these I would've picked mochi over dango any day of the week. However, I suspect this was due to the fact I'd never tasted proper dango prior to this, having only sampled the cheap and nasty combini versions.

Although tiny in size the flavour was amazing, subtly sweet, delicate and melt in your mouth. Let's just say I was tempted to eat them all rather than sharing them with anyone else in my group!

These came close to what I'd consider the perfect Japanese confectionery.

Daniel (Jako) Jaccone



Rising from the flames

Break ups are evil. Whether it's been a long-term thing or that bit shorter, but accompanied by high hopes, deciding that enough is enough, or worse, having someone decide that for you, is one of the least entertaining things you can do with another person. You may know, in your heart of hearts, that things need to end because they haven't been 'right' for a while, but accepting that and acting upon it is a whole different ball game.

I may be talking out my proverbial behind, but there's a phoenix factor involved with the end of a relationship (maybe not one that only lasts 2 weeks I'll admit, but longer intervals...). As the dumped as opposed to the dumper, you can feel burnt, your spirit all but extinguished, with serious self-worth questions hanging over your head. When you've invested so much emotionally and physically (there are times when you have to include financially) into something, and it's just popped out of existence, you go into shock. You know you have to find some way to cope, but exactly what you can do to help isn't always terribly clear. So you get a new haircut, find a new hobby, heck, change jobs and move countries, and you examine your life in a different way. You don't need to reinvent yourself, just reacquaint yourself with the fact that no, you are a damn cool person who has been underappreciated for far too long. You can't exactly put it on a resume, but

you will be a stronger, better person having gotten over a relationship than you ever were when in it. Learn about yourself, and become better through the experience.

Now it might not be a popular thing, but I also want to send out a little bit of love to the people who have done the breaking up, the heartbreakers, if you will. As long as someone's not a serial destroyer of souls, I feel like it's all too easy to forget, as you're in your own personal pit of despair or witnessing the complete emotional breakdown of a friend, that the relationship has ended for the other party too. In most cases (unless things are really f**ked up) someone doesn't end a relationship because they actively hate their partner and want to see them suffer as much as possible. On many levels it's a very brave thing to break up with someone knowing all the crap that will entail. By breaking up with someone, you are inviting animosity, vitriol and the possible loss of shared friends, all whilst knowing you have caused someone you like (just not as much as you thought you did) pain. You think they want to go through that?

There will perhaps be arguments about 'why didn't you talk to me about x - we could have sorted it out', but surely that's a pretty good sign that the relationship wasn't in that great of a state, if your partner didn't

feel comfortable even mentioning that they weren't happy. At that point talking things out probably won't help. It may take a while, but look back over things, and you'll sometimes find yourself wondering why the hell things weren't over sooner. It's the whole 'hindsight is 20-20' thing.

A little part of you may always want to scream at 'the Ex', but you might also want to shake their hand. Think about where and who you are now. How did your relationships/break-ups get you here?

And you never know, you might eventually remember why you **did** get on in the halcyon days of your relationships, be able to separate that from the naked-writhing aspects of the entanglement and, shock-horror, be (dare I say it?) friends.

Disclaimer – If someone has another piece of derrière to hop onto all lined up when they break up with you, ignore the above. As a very pragmatic person I will accept that if the subsequent relationship lasts for at least 6 months (and that's being nice), the Ex might not be a dick, anything less and drag them over hot coals because they deserve it for breaking your/your friend's heart. There's nothing admirable about wandering eyes.

Q.C.

Biking Biwa

琵琶湖 (びわこ; Lake Biwa) is Japan's

largest freshwater lake and covers a large part of Shiga Prefecture. It's a haven for birdwatchers, watersports, camping, and generally having a good time outdoors. It's also a very popular destination for cyclists with a well-kept cycle path pretty much all the way around. At approximately 220km in circumference, it wasn't going to be the easiest thing to get around in two days, but there's nothing like a challenge to get you motivated (and hey, there are people who do it in 1 – we saw them whizzing past us on road bikes on a fairly regular basis).

First, I have a confession to make. When we completed our 琵琶湖一周 over a long weekend in September, we didn't *actually* go the entire way around the lake. If you look at a map of Biwako, you'll see the wonderful Rainbow Bridge to the south. Rather than trawl through the urban sprawl of Otsu we headed over the bridge, cutting around 40km off our route. It was a good decision and recommended if planning your own trip. If coming

from Hyogo though, the most obvious place to start would be Otsu. Life sucks sometimes.

No, we started right up at the top of the lake in a little place called 木之本 (きのもと; Kinomoto) for the simple reason that we had friends living there. We then went round the lake anti-clockwise too. Basically, we did everything 'wrong'. That said, doing things 'the wrong way round' really, really worked in our favour. We started up north where the hills are, and therefore had fresh legs when tackling the most energy-consuming section of the route. The more usual clockwise route, taking in the Otsu to Nagahama section of the lake, would have you on the hills at the end of the day. I don't think that would be fun. Not fun at all. Don't do that. Start in Nagahama or Hikone and go anti-clockwise too.

The north side of the lake is absolutely stunning. The hills, whilst much more tiring than other sections of the lake,

make for beautiful scenery, and once you're out of them, the relatively undeveloped area around the lake provides a peaceful and fun riding experience. However, when I say it's less developed, I really mean that. It was a September trip, but as we know, that can still be on the warm side. The weather was cloudy at first, which was great for cycling, but as the clouds scarpered leaving a beautiful sunny day, my British skin started to heat a little. It was idiotic not to have brought sun cream with us, but we're in Japan, and there are conbinis, so I just figured we'd stop at the next one and I could slather myself in protective lotion. The sun got hotter, my arms got crispier, and about 2 hours later we finally reached a conbini. Let's just say that lobsters had nothing on me by that point.

Aside from the burning, it was a great first day of cycling. There are various little places along the route to have breaks and see what there is to see. The cycle route is well marked, though we still managed to miss one turning

and go a little off course. Realizing the error, we headed back to find said sign staring us in the face. I guess you miss things when you're getting tired. Our overnight was in Otsu, with a view of the Rainbow Bridge. We arrived just as the sun was setting, and only a little later than we'd expected. It had been a full day and since I was embarrassed to be seen in public in my sunbaked state, after an uneventful dinner, it was bed time.

Day two started wonderfully. The sun was shining (but I had sun cream now!) and it was time to go over the bridge. The view from the top was gorgeous, and it's a singing bridge so that was entertaining too (small grooves on the road surface, spaced so they play a tune as you drive over them – probably works better if you're actually **in** a car). Our legs knew that they'd cycled the day before, but weren't grumbling about it. There was definitely a lot more along the east side of the lake than there had been on the west. There were still some stretches where we didn't see anyone else for long periods, but it wasn't like the previous day (possibly because I wasn't praying for a conbini to appear on the horizon).

As we cycled north, we knew that we had a choice before us – taking the hillier road that hugged the lakeshore, or heading more inland,

but with a (theoretically) more easy-going set of inclines. As we approached 長命寺町 (ちようめいじ ちょう; Chōmeiji-cho) it was still early in the day and we were feeling good, so the shoreline it was! I was ecstatic that we made this decision. Smaller, leaf-shaded roads kept us cool and sun dappled, with the occasional breaks in the trees providing further great views of Biwa and great excuses to have a short rest. There wasn't a cycle path on this section, and the road was pretty narrow at times, but don't miss it!

As we approached the end of the trip, life got a lot more difficult. Whilst we'd been making pretty good time for most of the day, our legs were getting tired and it soon became clear that we weren't going to make it back to the bike rental place before it closed (when we picked up the bikes we'd mentioned the possibility of this happening so it wasn't a problem). Accepting this, we slowed a bit more and made it back to Kinomoto just after sunset. The sense of achievement upon getting off the bike, wobbly-legged and unsure about your ability to get up a flight of stairs, was incredible. Next stop – the rather less intimidating しまなみ街道 (しまなみかいどう; Shimanami Kaido) from Shikoku to Honshu.

Notes

- You can rent mamacharis for as little as ¥500 a day; this is what we did, however, we had the ones with a few (i.e. 3) gears. Those gears were a life-saver on some of the hills. It wasn't much, but I wouldn't have wanted nothing. Road bikes are also available for more, but if you have the time, taking a slower bike can be nice too. Having a basket for your bag so your back won't get sweaty is another good thing.
- Alternatively, if you have your own bike, get a bike bag and you can take it on the train with you!
- There are camp grounds all around the lake, so possibly consider camping as it gets warmer.
- This trip was all about getting around the lake, rather than using it as an opportunity to explore the cities along the shore (which we'd done on other occasions). Taking an extra day to go around the lake, and the time to explore Hikone and Nagahama, is definitely something I would have wanted to do otherwise. The city centers of both are probably less than 10 mins from the lakeshore, and really worth seeing, not least to get some 地ビール (micro-brew beer) in Nagahama.

Omogen Custance

太陽ノ塔

Café Taiyounotou * Green West

It's difficult to find a chilled out

café in the bustling city of Osaka. I usually go round in circles looking for one then realise I'm still in Umeda station. That's when I give up, and head to Starbucks. I feel slightly guilty as I enjoy my white caramel mocha. To think I'm in Osaka, a city boasting over 100 Michelin stars, and there I am, in one of the 20,000 branches of this U.S coffee chain. It's time to give Osaka the exploration it needs.

Journeying past the realms of Umeda really opens up your dining (and shopping) options. Nakazakicho is a ward of Osaka just a 10 minute walk away from the busyness of Umeda. It is a huge contrast in terms of noise level, building style and businesses. The quiet streets of Nakazakicho quietly offer second-hand clothing, nik-naks and self-made boutiques to its trendy frequenters. It was the first time I had seen something that felt close to Europe in Osaka.

A friend took me, along railway tracks, past vintage shops and into a back alley, to a little hidden emerald café, Green West. The confidence of the green exterior carried through inside; there was a strong sense of the 60s that played well in this cutesy, quaint place. Groovy mustard yellow

wallpaper covered one wall; mismatched psychedelic prints layered the others, creating a warm, non-threatening environment. The mezzanine floor made the setting open and inviting since you could peer over sunken sofas at the other customers on their benched seats. The clientele varied from care-free uni students making a pot of chamomile tea last hours as they 'studied' to a couple romantically sharing a slice of chocolate cake.

A pretty waitress showed us up to our table. There, laid waiting, were a few photo albums; of course these were the menus, how quirky. It was easy to miss the food pages as this café has an extensive drinks menu, mostly made up of fruit teas and cocktails. The food menu was limited but I like that. It's encouraging to think they only need a few top rated dishes to satisfy their customers. There wasn't one clear type of cuisine on offer but rather a collection of Thai, Hawaiian and Japanese. I opted for the open taco (~¥900) and my companion, the Thai green curry (~¥900). The menu was in Japanese, but mainly in katakana so you could guess a lot of what was on offer, or just point and play a bit of restaurant roulette.

The free time presented after ordering was used to leisurely flick through the drinks again and spot a curious flyer. The café, unsurprisingly, turns into a cool late night drinking hole featuring local DJs. Having added an evening return to Green West to my Japan bucket list, another edgy, attractive waitress delivered our plates. My taco was nowhere to be seen. Instead I had rice topped with a chili-con-carne-type mixture, topped with an egg, framed by a green salad. The meal was a party for all the senses: the rainbow of colours welcomed me in; the meaty smell triggered my salivary glands; the texture of the runny egg contrasted with the chunky rice heaped on my tongue; the flavor of spices and herbs infused my taste buds and the resulting sound of a Japanese cooking show host (ooooooooiiiiiiiiiii!) completed the sensory carnival.

For the after party it was only right to order cake. One caramel, banana, chocolate cake with a clear pot of rooibos for me (~¥900) and the strawberry cheesecake with a side of coffee for my friend please! Even though I was fully saturated from the taco-less taco I did not regret the sweet order. It was delicious, and delicately

complimented by the loose leaf tea.

We watched day turn into night from Green West. It's that sort of place where life just passes you by as you chat about recent happenings. Green West is one of five Café Taiyounotous in Osaka, so not as unique as I once thought, but it's still much less than 20,000.

A great place for cake and tea and lunch and chats.

Cherie Pham

Tell me more..!

Address: 2丁目 - 4 - 36
Nakazakinishi, Kita Ward, Osaka,
Osaka Prefecture 530 - 0015

Tel: 06-6131-4400

Website: taiyounotou.com

Opening times: 11.00~24.00

Lunch: ~¥1000 (11.00~16.00)

Dinner: ~¥1500



葛井寺 * Fujii-dera

Fujii-dera is temple number five

of 33 on the pilgrim circuit, and as its name "Wisteria Well Temple" would suggest, it is a wonderful place to visit when the fuji are in bloom. These fragrant purple flowers typically bloom in very late April or in early May, around Golden Week.

Other than the gorgeous blossoms, the main enshrined image of Fujii-dera might attract your attention. It is a senju (thousand armed) Kannon, which isn't terribly rare, but this carving, made in the 700s in dry lacquer style, **actually** has a thousand arms. In fact, it has 1,042. The image itself is a National Treasure and the Kannon of Fujii-dera is prayed to for the warding off of disaster, and also by women wanting a safe delivery in childbirth.

The image is displayed on the 18th of each month.

The temple grounds are small, a great contrast to the sprawling mountainside temples we've seen so far. There are four gates, one for each of the four cardinal directions, which lead out into the bustling suburbs. You may notice as you approach that you are walking through a covered arcade. Historically, many temples were served by monzen machi, just such streets lined with shops, eateries, and inns (among other things), to meet the needs of pilgrims on the road.

The temple grounds themselves are transformed into a market square once a month on the 18th, corresponding to the day the Fujii Kannon is put on display. At these

markets you can find everything from foods to all manner of items from the mundane (like underwear and caps) to the artistic or sacred.

Like several of the pilgrimage temples, this one contains a mini pilgrimage on the grounds. Those who are unable to undertake the full pilgrimage can simulate it for the same spiritual benefit if their hearts are really in it. You will find a few more interesting statues as you walk around. One is a depiction of Kannon riding a dragon known as the Sonshinryu Kannon. Although the pose of Kannon is pretty static, the billowing cloak gives a sense of motion and wind. You will also find a Shusse Jizo, to whom people pray for success in projects for business or studies, and a small shrine on the water

to Benzaiten, the patron of music and poetry.

The current Hondo was built in 1753, but there has been a temple at this site for about 1,400 years. You can see the foundation stone of the family temple built on the site by the Fujii clan all those years ago. The pilgrim book stamp office is to one side of the hondo.

In addition to the wisteria vines, there is one other vegetative attraction at Fujii-dera. The Sanko Maki is a special type of pine tree sacred to Buddhists because it has three prongs on each set of leaf spikes. These are considered to represent the three aspects of Buddhism --the Buddha, the Dharma (teaching), and the Sangha (religious community). Kobo Daishi, founder of Shingon

Buddhism, is said to have brought the seeds of the sanko maki to Japan from China in 805.

The temple is located in the south of Osaka, in a town aptly named Fujiidera. Although this may seem a bit far to many Hyogo dwellers, Fujii-dera is rather easy to reach from the transportation hub that is central Osaka. Take the Kintetsu Minami line from Osaka Abenobashi station (a five minute walk from Tennoji) to Fujiidera station.

Happy pilgriming!

Emily Lemmon

Tell me more!

To find out more about the history of Fujii-dera, check out [Sacred Japan](#).

Departures (2008)

It is hard to believe that in the great history of Japanese cinema only one film has ever won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. It was not one Kurosawa's epic masterpieces like **Ran** or **Seven Samurai**, or other Japanese favorites like **Tokyo Story** or **Tanpopo** (the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film was not established until 1956, after many of the most famous Japanese films were released). It was awarded to a relatively unknown film in 2009, a film called **Departures** (おくりびと) directed by Yojiro Takita.

It is a beautiful story of life and death and one's man's journey to piece all the broken parts of his life together, while maintaining loyalty to his newfound and odd profession.

It begins with a handsome man named Daigo Kobayashi. He has just lost his job as a professional cellist after his orchestra went bankrupt. After revealing to his wife the loss of his job, and his recent secret cello purchase, they have no choice but to move back to his childhood home, where his just deceased mother had lived two years before. Without his cello and a home of his own, he feels

lost having to begin life again where it all started years before.

While looking through the newspaper for a job, he stumbles upon a promising opportunity which he thinks is a job for a travel agency. After a brief interview with a gruff old man, he is given the job immediately, without really understanding what the job entails. He soon discovers his job is like a travel agency but it caters to a different kind of travel – preparing dead bodies for their trip into the afterlife.

Daigo learns the art of preparing a departed body in a ritualistic manner for the afterlife. The body is cleaned and washed in view of kneeling mourners, preserving the deceased person's privacy with carefully arranged sheets. Then the corpse is washed and dressed, made-up and placed in a simple wooden coffin. Daigo's first lessons prove to be difficult, but his boss never lets him even consider quitting.

Daigo does not tell the details of his work to his wife because it is not a well-respected occupation. In spite of this, they become closer than ever, happily living in his childhood home until the day

his wife discovers Daigo's job details. Although she loves him dearly, she simply cannot be with someone who touches dead people for a living. She leaves him after he refuses to leave his new profession.

Daigo must win back his wife's affection but at the same time stay loyal to his new profession, which he has come to respect and love. The story unravels into a perfectly performed and well-written, comedy-drama that appeals in an odd, emotional way. The viewer cannot help but become connected to the characters and their emotions.

The music of the film is very beautiful and really lends itself to the mood of the story. The cello music played by Daigo, both in his outside fantasy world, and his childhood bedroom, fits the feeling and emotions conveyed in the story. The acting is superb and the actors really let you feel comfortable with their personalities, the viewer sometimes forgetting they are watching a film because of their authenticity. The cinematography is very clean and it does a beautiful job telling the story without being too intrusive.

It may have taken almost 60 years for a Japanese movie to win the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, but *Departures* is a worthy recipient. It is a must see film for any cinema fan or Japanese cultural enthusiast. It delivers a peek into the very rare and interesting afterlife preparation rituals of Japan, while at the same time telling an amazing and unforgettable story of love and life.

Jon Burroughs



ht

Sunshine fun-time - it's just around the corner!