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Travel Japan!: Okinawa, Asahikawa and Izushi

Valentine's Day: Japan Style



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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: [hyogotimespublications@gmail.com](mailto:hyogotimespublications@gmail.com).

## Message from the Editor

**Congratulations! You have made it through the** coldest month of the year and hopefully only lost non-essential digits to frostbite. Whether you have decided to remain in Japan for a further year or not, at least decision time is over. This is of course a valid reason to celebrate and the third semester is the optimum time to do so. After around six weeks of teaching the majority of us will be free to twiddle our thumbs at our desks, work on personal projects [I am relearning German after four years off. It's not going terribly well so far], or take advantage of the off-season to do some travelling [Peach flights to Taipei and Hong Kong look particularly tempting. No I am not employed by Peach, but I should be.]

I personally love February. There are wintry adventures to be had all across Japan; from the spectacular Yuki Matsuri in Sapporo, to skiing in northern Hyogo and snow fun even on Mount Rokko. This month we can still justify double portions of everything (extra padding needed for insulation), wearing terribly coordinated outfits just for the extra layers and, of course, falling asleep under the kotatsu. And if you are longing to defrost once and for all, look no further than the gardens at Osaka castle, where the early blooming plum blossoms are giving us our first hopeful taste of spring.

February can also be an emotional month; Valentine's Day is a contentious topic but who can complain of the home-made sweets doled out by adoring students? My advice is to save these treats for graduation day, when tears will inevitably be shed [definitely by them, probably by you] and a hug-in-a-chocolate will work wonders and cement your reputation as *the best ALT ever!*

To pass the time waiting for spring's warmth, broaden your mind with this month's issue of the Hyogo Times where we've got something for everyone. Winter travellers to Hokkaido should read our hunger-inducing food guide as well as about Asahikawa, an alternative to Sapporo. If you fancy something warmer then perhaps our lovely new writer Claire can persuade you to try island hopping in Okinawa. Staying local and feeling cultural? Check out our review of GEAR. In the Current Affairs section Abe-san is making waves in Africa and with his "Active Pacifism" policies. We also have regular features Kicchiri Kitchen, Just Ask Ava, the Kannon and another special edition WATN?, plus more!

Read away my friends!

Until next month,

*Char*





Hello x 2!

## Message from the PR

### To stay, or not to stay?

That was the question we recently asked ourselves. By now your papers are signed and handed in. For JETs choosing to re-contract, I offer my congratulations! I hope the incoming year will offer more unforgettable experiences for you.

For JETs choosing to make the next big (and scary) step, CLAIR is hosting the 2014 After JET Conference from February 20 to 21 in Yokohama City. JET alumni, employers, and consultants are scheduled to attend. At last year's conference, workshops discussed topics such as transferrable skill sets, NGO/NPO, résumés, and cross-cultural consulting. This list is by no means exhaustive, and you can expect similar workshops this year.

Regardless of your final decision, you still need to brave the cold winter. Luckily, the Prefectural Representatives at Hyogo AJET have you in mind when planning our events for February and March. We're kicking off the month with the third Book Club meeting held on February 2, where we will be reading Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*. If you miss it, no worries, Cherie will put the next title online, and you'll have another great read as you curl up under the *kotatsu*.

In the meantime, look forward to the skiing and snowboarding trip up in Northern Hyogo on March 1. We'll be hitting the slopes at

Hachikogen and Hachikita. All levels, from beginner to advanced, will find something just right. Are you a first timer and want some guidance? There's a school! Have you been doing this for ten years and want to challenge yourself? There are moguls and rails!

Once five o'clock strikes, the last of the lifts close, and your body tells you that you can't possibly do any more; we will relax at the local *onsen* and gather for a home cooked sukiyaki meal at the lodge afterwards. The deadline to RSVP has passed but if you'd still like a spot, contact Patricia Jordan directly. I hope to see you there!

*Whitney Litzy*



生チョコ  
Nama Choco

### Ingredients

**Prep time: 10 mins**

**Cook time: 5 mins**

**Chill time: 20+mins**

**Makes 24 chocolates**

- 200g of your favourite dark or milk chocolate
- 100ml fresh cream (生クリーム)
- Cocoa powder (for dusting)
- Optional toppings: crushed pistachios, Valentinesy sprinkles
- Baking tin lined with wax paper (a 7" square tin will do, but I used a 6" x 3" and made individual chocolates too) or 24 small chocolate molds

I'm going to prepare you for Valentine's Day this year. In Japan the whole day revolves around chocolate. This recipe can be made for friends, co-workers, boyfriends and girlfriends so you're either making tomochoco (友チョコ), giri choco (義理チョコ) or for your own true love, honmeichoco (本命チョコ). Whoever it is, this recipe is easy to do and may even catch the eye of that sexy sensei, turning girichoco into full on honmei style.

### Step one

Chop the chocolate up into shavings (so they melt quicker and smoother!).

### Step two

Gently heat the cream in a saucepan until near boiling then turn off heat.

### Step three

Tip in the chocolate in batches and stir until melted completely.

### Step four

Pour the mix into your lined baking tin and smooth over using the back of a spoon (add toppings now). Alternatively, divide the mixture into chocolate molds.

### Step five

Put in the fridge for about 20 minutes or until firm.

### Step six

Using a warm knife, cut the chocolate slabs vertically and horizontally to make rectangular pieces.

**Tip!** For easy cutting, wipe the knife after each cut and run under hot water to warm, then wipe again.

### Step seven

Using a sieve, dust your chocolaty goodies with cocoa powder.

Now that you're done you can wrap them individually in patterned wax paper (to disguise their mismatched shapes!) and share the love. Or eat the whole batch and start from scratch.

Happy Valentine's Day!

*Cherie Pham*





# A Beginner's Guide to Anna Howard Shaw Day in Japan

## With February upon us it is time

to celebrate the birth of famous suffragette leader, Anna Howard Shaw, on Anna Howard Shaw Day, or, as some people like to call it, Valentine's Day.

Like most Japanese appropriations of Western holidays, a sensation of "same same but different" permeates February 14 in the land of the rising sun. So ladies, don't lose your cool when your significant other arrives home with an assortment of too-cute-to-be-edible confectionary items. And gentlemen, it's probably not safe to assume your bumbling Japanese and awkward gaijin-isms have endeared yourself to the local female community. More than anything, Valentine's Day, like most traditions in Japan, is about mutual societal obligation and conformity.

## Valentine's Day

Introduced in Japan in 1936 by a confectionary company, Valentine's Day was marketed as the day for women to gift chocolates to men as an expression of their love. That it was only for women to bear this burden is, apparently, the result of a mistranslation.

From these humble origins, the Japanese have again proved they do capitalism like no one else, successfully capturing the hitherto untapped Valentine's market of sad singles by linking the gift of chocolate to a show of appreciation. On Valentine's Day, Japanese women will often give cheaper, "Giri-choco" or "obligation chocolate" to men they work, or are friends with, in return for the good favour received. Less popular colleagues may receive the ultra-obligatory, cheapest, "Cho-giri-choco."

For that special someone, women will give "Honmei-choco," or "true feeling chocolate" which is usually more expensive (or homemade) and accompanied by another gift like a necktie. Understandably, surveys have shown that mistaking Giri-choco for Honmei-choco (or vice versa) is a main cause of many sad Valentine's Days.

Women may also choose to give more expensive chocolate to their female friends, "Tomo-choco." And don't forget "Jibun-choco," that is, chocolate for yourself.

Other gifts, such as cards, sweets, or flowers are less common. Indeed, the overriding popularity of chocolate is evident when you learn half of chocolate companies' annual sales derive from this time.

## White Day

For each for action there is an equal and opposite reaction, and that is as true for Valentine's Day as it is for physics. On March 14, it is time for us to celebrate "White Day," wherein recipients of chocolates and gifts on Valentine's Day are obliged to return the favour.

In 1977 a confectionary company devised a way to "redress the imbalance" (with the convenient side effect of boosting sales) by encouraging men to give marshmallows on "Marshmallow Day," March 14, in return for any chocolate received. While this campaign was not entirely successful, in 1978 the Japanese Confectionery Industry Association successfully rallied to make March 14 "White Day" and another triumph of capitalism was born.

On White Day, men are expected to return gifts two or three times more valuable than that they received, whether this be chocolate (white, of course), jewellery, clothing, or underwear. In true Japanese tradition, despite the commercial origin, this obligation carries its own set of rules. If you return a present of equal value, this signals you are ending the relationship. Not giving anything at all, even with an appropriate excuse, indicates you feel yourself superior to such gestures.

But the lunacy doesn't stop there...

## Black Day

We can always rely on our neighbours to take it one step too far. In South Korea, those who received nothing on either Valentine's Day or White Day mourn their singledom on "Black Day". April 14 is the day when sad singles flock to restaurants to eat black noodles (jajangmyeon), the Korean comfort food equivalent of hoeing into a large tub of ice cream.

Like Valentine's Day in your own country, how you choose to acknowledge or ignore the day is your choice. More than anything, maybe Valentine's Day in Japan is a reminder of our power to improve cultural understanding and communicative ability. Improve your students' English too much and these funny cultural misappropriations will no longer occur. So put aside that lesson plan and load up the YouTube videos.

*Kylie Pinder*



# What goes up, must come down... by any means necessary

## Seeing in the New Year from a mountain top

### 'Leisurely'.

Yes, I distinctly remembered that particular adjective being mentioned. 'Easy', yes, I think 'easy' was there too. It was just a shade away from 'strolling'. Half-way up a boulder-strewn mountain slope in the pitch-dark, elbows and feet grimly jammed into crevices in the slippery rock, torch dangling awkwardly from one hand, I wondered whether it worth suggesting that World Express rethink the definition of that particular adjective.

The mountain in question was 白山 *Haku-san*, the White Mountain, just outside of Nishiwaki. We had dribbled in from all corners of Hyogo on the last train to the station at 11:30pm on New Year's Eve, bleary and shivering, comparing how many layers of clothing we had managed to strap on our persons (I was beginning to look distinctly like the Michelin man wearing most of the contents of my wardrobe). The hike was organised through Hyogo AJET, with World Express hiking tours, and promised an authentic taste of Japanese New Year; 初詣 *hatsumoude* (first shrine visit of the year), a hike through the night to see the first dawn of the New Year breaking and traditional *osechi* to round things off. Since the only cultural tradition I had inherited for New Year was butchering 'Auld Lang Syne' after too much straight

whisky, it seemed a more intellectually promising start to the New Year.

We were met by two friendly older Japanese men who would act as our guides, one of whom was English speaking. After distributing Japanese horoscopes for our New Year fortunes (which informed us that we were all dating the wrong people), we set off in file through the dark streets to Narita-San shrine.

Japanese festivals have, in my personal opinion, the perfect balance; the minimum amount of time possible spent on actual religion and the maximum amount of time spent eating. The shrine was crowded with stalls selling the ubiquitous *takoyaki*, *daifuku* and sugar-glazed fruit-on-a-stick of all Japanese matusuris. The fires crackling in oil barrels against the winter chill and the humid heat of the crowd gave an oily sheen to the cold clear night. We joined the line snaking up the shrine steps waiting for おみくじ *omikuji* (fortunes). New Year in Japan is primarily a celebration for family and friends, and most of the town seemed to have turned out with their nearest and dearest. Japanese boys wearing too much hair gel and unfortunate gold jewellery with a tottering girlfriend apiece jostled noisily behind us; grandparents snatched

fruitlessly after over-excited grandchildren; a gaggle of girls still in their high-school uniforms were snapping everything incessantly on their iPhones. It was an authentic taste of small-town Japan alright.

Having finally collected our *omikuji* from the frazzled looking *miko*, we headed back down the hill comparing our respective luck. We walked on into the dark of the countryside, soon leaving the muzzy glow of the town behind, picking our way past the shadowy fields of rice and daikon. A member of the town's tourism office had generously offered his house to rest in before tackling the mountain, so we spent two cosy hours nestled around the *kotatsu* playing cards and eating Pocky. By now it was 3:30am.

Finally, and reluctantly, we left the warmth and headed by car to the foot of mountain. A crowd of around seventy people had gathered in the mossy-stoned mountain shrine, stamping their feet and blowing on their hands as the wind began to pick up. After a co-ordinated warm up of *raijo taiso*, the mass of people started in single-file up the mountain, skidding on the leaf-mulch and damp rocks. It was pitch-black, apart from the bobbing fire-fly glow of torches winding up the



peak in the distance and the dusty white glitter of the Milky Way overhead.

'Leisurely' it was not. Puffing and scrambling, we followed our guide who was hopping up over the rocks with an indecent healthiness for someone his age. There were sheer drops along the side of the path, a black tangle of forest, and constant calls of 'watch out!' as various overhanging branches and pot-holes snagged someone ahead. We kept going for four hours to an echoing litany of which muscles were throbbing or marvelling at the

beauty of the mountains' silhouettes framed against the sky. As we climbed higher, the sky started to lighten to dusky mauve until, after a final scramble up the white rocks, we reached the summit. We collapsed with the rest of the hikers around the bonfire perched precariously on the edge, digging out the spare chocolate supplies.

The sky lightened to lavender, shot though with ribbons of bronze and apricot. Then finally the sun rose in a molten gold ball. A cheer went up to the percussion of dozens of clicking camera shutters. The

opening to 'Circle of Life' seemed to be playing somewhere. It was almost perfect.

The sense of blissful rebirth lasted until the realization that we had to scramble back down again... All hikers are masochists at heart!

*Lorna Petty*





Travel Japan!



**Bumper  
edition!**

Okinawa  
Asahikawa  
Izushi



## Island by Island: Off-season in Okinawa

### During winter vacation, I traded

Hyogo's rice paddies and fallen leaves for the pineapple fields and mangrove forests of Okinawa! Hoping to take advantage of off-season prices and fewer crowds, a fellow ALT and I embarked on a journey of island hopping, ocean kayaking, coral reef snorkeling, and a long list of other exciting activities. Although most people don't associate the archipelago with winter travel (most of my JTEs were confused when I told them about my plans), visiting Okinawa in the off-season has its benefits as well as a few disadvantages. All things considered, my four-day, four-island trip can be summarized as a lovely tour through Japan's most southern and most unique prefecture.

### Getting there

Naha International Airport serves all the major Japanese and East Asian airlines, including our favorite low-cost carriers. Naha, Ishigaki, and Iriomote also have large ferry terminals that connect the smaller islands among the chains. You have to fly to the Yaeyama Islands via Ishigaki Airport. Traveling among the

islands themselves can be a bit tricky and does require advanced planning.

### Eat

Okinawa soba is quite different from its buckwheat counterpart, more closely resembling udon with an egg-like flavor. The proudly purple sweet potato tart, *beniima*, dominates the omiyage stands, although local Okinawan sugarcane treats are also popular (I recommend the Blue Seal sugarcane ice cream). Goya, a bitter vegetable recognizable by its bumpy outer skin is present in many dishes. *Chanpuru*, a kind of stir-fry, can serve as a great vegetarian option if the tofu version is on the menu. Finally, imo-flavored, small round donut holes are widely available. Of course, Awamori liquor (distilled, not brewed) is readily available while Orion Beer, originally made popular during the American occupation, dominates the tap.

### A little history

The Ryukyuan people are the original inhabitants of Okinawa and the culture is still very present in the language, architecture,

textiles, and food. The Ryukyu kings ruled autonomously over the islands for hundreds of years before becoming a tributary state of China in the 1600's. This relationship continued until clans from nearby Kagoshima conquered the islands in the early 1600s.

### Understand

Due to its past relationship with China, Okinawa developed under very different circumstances and influences than mainland Japan. The prefecture was not officially integrated until after the Meiji Restoration. In modern times, Okinawa played a pivotal role in World War II, including many years of American occupation. The story of the Battle of Okinawa is extremely sobering and post-war tensions between Okinawa's residents and leaders in Tokyo continue to this day.

At times, Okinawa felt like a completely different country instead of an extension of Japan. Its laid-back island atmosphere, seaside colors, and slower pace of life combined with the regional language, food, and architecture were very

different from the fast, crowded streets of urban Hyogo. Of course the warmer temperatures also helped to enhance my experience.

### Naha, Okinawa

The first stop was Okinawa Island. Naha is the prefecture's largest city with an active downtown, intriguing restaurants, and a visible nightlife scene. Tiny canals run through the city while large shopping districts sell everything from luxury brands to artisan crafts. The Tsuboya Pottery district offers a unique stroll through a neighborhood dedicated to traditional Okinawan pottery and workshops.

The most popular tourist site is probably Shuri Castle, the home of the former Ryukyu kings. The Ryukyuan's long-term relationship with China greatly influenced the culture of the islands and its impact is most visible in the architectural style of Shuri Castle. Instead of Himeji Castle's bright white coloring, Shuri is washed in



The Dragon Throne



Pinaisara visible in the background

a deep red with extremely ornate and decorative motifs in gold, green, blue, and pink. The castle's main hall is topped by two fierce dragon heads and the reception room, proudly displaying the Dragon Throne, glows under low lighting and golden artwork. The castle is the last stop on the Yuri Rail and sits in the center of a large park, rising on a hill above the city.

### Kerama Islands

Zamami Island boasts a gorgeous coastline edged by coral reefs sitting just below turquoise waters filled with tropical fish and other ocean creatures. Zamami is the largest island in the Kerama chain (part of the Okinawa Islands) and can be reached by one of two boat companies, varying in speed. We had scheduled a kayak and snorkeling tour with Kayak Drifters, unfortunately, the weather was quite windy, with rain for most of the day.

Despite the overcast skies, the water was warm and the wetsuit was almost unnecessary (keep in mind, I'm from New England). Our guide, while slightly perturbed by our willingness to go swimming in December, happily setup a small lean-to on the deserted beach and cooked our lunch, Okinawa soba, over a portable stove. Our snorkeling adventures included floating with sea turtles, exploring colorful reefs, and meeting the entire cast of *Finding Nemo*. Our guide spoke minimal English, but excessive conversation wasn't necessary to express the beauty and splendor of the islands.

### Yaeyama Islands

After two nights in Naha we boarded a plane bound for Ishigaki Island. Ishigaki was well suited for tourists and even advertised an information center at the main ferry terminal with multiple English-speaking staff members.





Bottom of Pinaisara Falls



Mangrove forest, low-tide



Monkey park



Ishigaki City



Nemo



Our shelter for Christmas lunch

A helpful staff member suggested a local izakaya offering live traditional *sanshin* music every evening. It was a treat to enjoy local food while watching the crowd enthusiastically engage with the upbeat band. If you visit Okinawa you will quickly become familiar with popular tunes like “Shima Uta”, and you’ll even learn when to chime in for the chorus!

Ishigaki offers plenty of opportunity for outdoor adventures including river kayaking and glass-bottom boat cruises. However, rough tides, high winds, and general winter weather forced some tours to close unexpectedly during our trip, and reduced bus schedules made logistics difficult to manage at times. Despite these limitations, we used the reasonably priced taxi service to visit Ishigaki’s main attractions: Yaima Mura and Kabira Bay.

Yaima Mura is a small traditional Okinawan village with preserved buildings, including an old samurai residence. The park offers music and dance demonstrations as well as the option to taste handmade Okinawan sugarcane sweets. There is

also a small mangrove forest and a fenced-in monkey park with a troop of free-range monkeys that are extremely cute and exceedingly devious. Monkey food is available for a cheap price and should you choose to decline the purchase these little critters will gladly inspect your pockets and bags for other treats.

Kabira Bay is by far the most colorful body of water I’ve ever dipped my toes in. The short beach opens into a pool of underwater coral reefs dotted with tiny islands and short rock formations before emptying into the ocean. The glass-bottom boats were all anchored, due to rough winter tides, but we were still able to enjoy a stroll along the beach as the sun made occasional appearances through the dense cloud cover. In addition to its beautiful colors and coastline, Kabira Bay is also famous for its black pearl cultivation – an expensive souvenir if you are so inclined. Surprisingly, public transportation from Ishigaki City to Kabira Bay (a 40 minute bus ride) is very infrequent. The same bus runs from Ishigaki to Yaima Mura and Kabira Bay.

## Taketomi Island

Taketomi Island is the perfect place for a short day trip from Ishigaki. Taketomi offers extremely rural sightseeing and small country roads lined with traditional homes and structures. Of course, the best way to view these sights is with the help of the island’s water buffalo population. These taciturn creatures spend their days pulling wooden carts of tourists through the small winding streets. Our guide described the scenery and played the *sanshin* while the buffalo plodded along the trail by memory, requiring no directions or signals. (Combined ferry and buffalo ride tickets available from Ishigaki tourist center.)

## Iriomote Island

The final hop on our tour of the islands was Iriomote, the largest island in the Yaeyama chain. Iriomote is revered for its jungle-like interior full of optimal hiking trails, waterfalls, and brackish rivers. The island is also home to a recently discovered species of wildcat; *Iriomote Yamaneko*, the mountain cat.

This cute little creature looks like a typical housecat only patterned like a leopard. Its popularity explains the large number of service people wearing tiny cat ears.

We filled our time in Iriomote with a kayaking and hiking tour, organized by Iriomote Osanpo. The tour began with an hour-long kayaking trip through a dense mangrove forest. Paddling between the tightly knitted mangroves under a beautiful blue sky (finally, sunlight!) was my favorite experience of the trip. Our journey began during low tide, when the twisted maze of mangrove roots is visible above the low water line. From our vantage point, we could see the cascade of Pinaisara Waterfall, the destination of our tour. After securing the kayaks, we began our hike up the small mountain to the top of Pinaisara Waterfall. The journey upward included walking among trees said to be over two hundred years old and climbing cliff faces with the aid of a knotted rope.

Once we reached the summit, we waded through the shallow river to the mouth of the waterfall. It was an

incredible view, looking out over the river and mangrove forest we had just kayaked through, which opened up into the shining blue ocean. In addition to being a beautiful photo opportunity, the mouth of the waterfall was a great place to grab a rock and eat lunch, typically provided by the tour guide. Before returning to the kayaks, we also hiked along the riverbed to the bottom of the waterfall, looking up at where we once stood. I suspect the large pool is a prime swimming hole during the summer months.

## Benefits of off-season travel

Spending Christmas in Okinawa was the perfect way to escape holiday tourists and end-of-year crowds, just don’t expect discounts! Cloudy skies, rain, and wind combined to limit the availability of various outdoor activities and the consistent lack of sunlight added a slightly gray tinge to the landscapes.

While the temperature was definitely warmer when compared to Hyogo, I felt that a jacket and long pants were still required. Reduced bus and ferry schedules, a result of the off-season but also exacerbated by the poor weather, made logistics a bit trickier than expected.

If your main goal is avoiding crowds, Okinawa is the place to be for Christmas and New Year. However, if you’re hoping to view the tropical islands in the best light possible while frolicking in your finest summer styles, plan your trip for early spring when the weather warms and the seas calm. Regardless of the season, Okinawa will be a special and exotic treat full of unique and unforgettable opportunities!

Claire Bronchuk



## Asahikawa - The Other Winter Festival

**Last year I traveled to Hokkaido** to see a zoo, the Asahiyama Zoo, and maybe take in a couple festivals. I mean who wouldn't want to see an adorable penguin parade, right? But, it was one of the festivals that really made my frigid trip awesome. The 冬まつり, or Winter Festival, occurs in the town of Asahikawa, an hour and a half train ride Northeast of Sapporo. And while that wonderland of enormous snow sculptures known as the Sapporo Snow Festival is grand, the Winter Festival is the little gem that lit up the frozen wasteland of my winter. Both festivals occur during the same week in early February, so if you are in Hokkaido for one, try to fit the other in too.

After my arrival in Asahikawa, I discovered that this festival is split into two sites. The primary location is near the river next to the Asahibashi bridge. The wide park-like area sports an ice slide, snowmen, and plenty of cold fun.

And of course, there's the festival food! Besides the typical food booths, there is also a delicious soup 'market'. When I visited it was after 8pm, (the sites close at 9pm) so the food booths were closed. However, the snow sculptures, all lit up after dark, were truly spectacular.

While Sapporo focuses on enormous snow sculptures that stand like mountains, Asahikawa brings you winter beauty on a smaller scale. However, if you must see an enormous hunk of snow, Asahikawa does have one; it's shaped liked a Transformer. That's right. A three story Optimus Prime made of snow is the main attraction at the festival's riverside site. Even if mechanical beings from space aren't your thing, this part of the festival is still a must see for its fun assortment of smaller snow sculptures and delicate ice lanterns.

For me, the most outstanding part of this festival was the second location. Every year the World Ice Sculpture competition is held here along Heiwadori, the pedestrian street starting from the East side of the Asahikawa train station. All along this street from the station through down town, artists from around the world create magnificent ice sculptures. The winged horses, mermaids, and other mythical creatures were fantastic, but one of my favorites was a pair of super-real sumo wrestlers, complete with flummoxed facial expression on the wrestler about to be tipped out of the ring. The sculptures are made the first couple days of the festival and then remain on display throughout the week. While the sculptures are impressive in the daylight, they are exceptionally stunning at night, when multicolored lights give them an unearthly

beauty. I was only in Asahikawa for two nights, but I made sure to visit both evenings.

The whole Winter Festival was so entrancing, I'm certainly returning for another round of ice this year. Maybe I'll see you there...

*Dana Warren*

*Tell me more!*  
[More info here](#)



This article is brought to you through a partnership between the **Heart of Japan** blog, a project by the Hyogo International Association, and the Hyogo Times.

## Izushi: A Little Kyoto

### Izushi is a castle town in

northern Toyooka City known as "Little Kyoto"; a small town that is filled with traditional architecture, performances, festivals, and soba noodles. Without a bullet train stop and variety of train lines and bus routes, Izushi might be more difficult to access than the city of Kyoto, but it's compact, quaint and perfectly walkable within a day.

Izushi is a more rustic version of Kyoto, lacking high-rise buildings and featuring a large Edo-style wooden clock tower instead of the modern metal artifice of Kyoto Tower. *Shinkorō* (possibly from the Latin root word *synchros*) is the one of the oldest clock towers in all of Japan, dating back to 1871, and epitomizing Japan's rapid shift from a feudal nation with an agricultural economy to a constitutional monarchy

modeled after western powers yet still retaining Edo-period and earlier elements.

If you want to learn about, and experience, more Japanese history, I recommend heading to the cheap **Izushi Historical Museum** (*Izushi Shiryokan*) (9:30–17:00; ¥300; closed Tuesdays). Instead of featuring long paragraphs of text on only vaguely interesting artifacts, the museum is a luxurious house dating back to 1876, filled with decorations like the umbrellas near the entrance that apparently split sunbeams into a beautiful pattern of rays at a certain time of day (which I wasn't lucky enough to witness and photograph on my visit). The Izushi Historical Museum is positively filled with rooms and large spaces that I've rarely seen in the Japanese style. Other than historical sites, the streets

surrounding the Shinkorō clock tower are filled with old-style storefronts that sell souvenirs.

**Sukyōji Temple** is a beautiful temple nearby, a definite must-see during the changing of the autumn leaves (*kōyō*). Separated from central downtown, Sukyōji offers beautiful Japanese maple scenery and was even decorated for Halloween – it seems that Japan won't ever stop importing foreign traditions.

To really experience some of the older traditions, however, I highly recommend visiting **Izushi Eirakukan Theatre** (9:30–17:00; ¥300 for general admission; closed Thursdays). The theater has Japanese-style cushion seating on tatami mats instead of upright seats, and is built largely of wood. It originally operated as a theater

for plays, but was then converted to a movie theater, then recently restored to a theater for kabuki plays and musical performances. It's a beautiful building with a specially designed stage that can be rotated, raised and lowered – all without electricity. Even without a performance going on, it is an interesting experience, but I suggest going for an actual performance, be it kabuki or a musical concert ([website](#); Japanese-only).

Finally, a trip around Izushi wouldn't be complete without going to a soba noodle restaurant or two. The town is famous for its **Soba Walk**, where visitors find soba restaurants all over, and eat as many plates of noodles as they can manage. In fact, many restaurants feature competitions, in which those who can eat a certain amount of noodles

in a specified time can win free meals for life and a placard on the wall, or other such prizes. One such restaurant is *Sakyō* (open 10:00–18:00, or 10:00–17:00 during the winter.

First five plates ¥800; ¥600 for each additional lot of 5 plates). The noodles are very good, and you get plenty for the price, but I couldn't eat more than half the number of noodles needed to win a prize. When served, you get to add wasabi, onion slices, mountain potatoes, raw egg, or

other ingredients to the tsuyu sauce in which you dip your noodles.

In any case, Izushi makes for a fun day-trip, especially if you can fall into a noodle-induced coma for the ride back.

*Joshua Kaplan*



## Just Ask Ava

Dear Ava,

Right from the get-go I've been wary of "omiyage". I hate shopping for birthday presents, and now I have to buy obligatory gifts for co-workers I barely even speak to? I do enjoy a good Tokyo banana when it's left for me, but I would opt out in a blink of an eye to save myself from all the bloody mochi hidden under my desk (I call it mochi mound, but it's growing!) and from wracking my brains and emptying my pockets for appropriate local morsels every time I take a trip.

Now don't get me wrong, I've been a good JET, I listened at pre-departure orientation and brought in some trinkets from my home country. The problem came when I caught the travel bug. I've already visited a handful of prefectures and made my first trip abroad to Taiwan this winter break. Each and every time I'm busting my budget to bring back the goods, not to mention exceeding the hand luggage allowance!

I cannot be the only one having this problem. Please tell me how to cut down on my omiyage giving, or even better, cut it out altogether. I'm tired of running to the gift shop last minute, lest I be guilt ridden the next time another over packaged, over sweetened mochi mysteriously appears on my desk. This is one aspect of Japanese culture I can do without.

Sincerely,

Agonising in Ako

Dear Agonising,

It must be admitted that gift culture here is rather different from what you may be used to. One might even go so far as to call it a guilt-gift culture. You must realise that omiyage is not an innocuous tidbit from a distant prefecture; it is a heartfelt, guilt-ridden apology for leaving your colleagues to hold the fort without you. Just think how lost they will be without your help in those student and class-free periods, omiyage is your penance. You have broken rank and abandoned your [work-free] post and must acknowledge this treachery with an envy-inducing sugary something of remorse. Not doing so is tantamount to dancing round the staff room shouting "I'm taking my annual leave to RELAX, not because I have a cold." This option is not advised; there is internationalisation, and then there is antagonism.

To save yourself some yen – though let's be honest, why bother with current exchange rates? – indulge in another traditional aspect of Japanese gift culture: re-gifting. That mound of mochi need not be left for your poor successor to find on their first sweltering day at the desk; simply pass on the unwanted confectionery upon return from your next jolly. Your colleagues will either not notice the eco-friendly provenance, or will be too polite to comment. Here also lies the only redeeming feature of those preservatives and layers of plastic wrapping: omiyage lasts. In fact do leave some for your successor with an explanation of the system; they will be forever indebted to you.

Generously,

Ava Hart

Do you have  
a **burning question**  
or cultural conundrum?  
Well, the Hyogo Times  
is proud to introduce the  
scintillating and savvy  
Ava Hart, here to answer  
all your concerns in  
her new column  
**Just Ask Ava.**





# Gear

## Japan has a rich culture of stage

performance, from *kabuki*, *bunraku* and *rakugo*, to the more modern Takarazaka revue. Now, in Kyoto, a new type of show is entertaining spectators at the weekends. The exceptional, non-verbal show GEAR is a treat for all ages.

In the future, in a dilapidated toy factory, the repetitive lives of four “Roboroids”, humanized robots, are forever changed when a toy-doll comes to life and begins to interact with them. Although entertaining to children, the story doesn’t really matter. The plot has been written as a vessel for demonstrating the amazing talents of the five member cast. Each interaction between Doll and Roboroid reveals a performer’s personal expertise. The Roboroids wow the audience with amusing mime artistry, great break-dancing, confounding magic and impressive juggling – none of which particularly add to the storyline, but together become a spectacular variety show of a play. Doll herself is endearingly puppet-like and effectively compères the 80 minute performance, throwing in some ballet and a light-up dress for good measure.

Of the talents presented the mime drew a lot of laughs (from a rather quiet but enraptured audience), but the magician won out on comedy when his audience participation picked on the only foreigners in the audience – always a winning move. The break-dancing Roboroid worked the crowd well throughout and the juggler’s colour-changing, eight-ball finale was truly mesmerising. Watching these performers will certainly inspire you to learn a new party trick!

It was not, however, purely the performances which amazed us. First of all, the set was excellent, stretching out to the audience (and even evident in the décor in the lobby toilets!) to make the toy-factory feel real and really involve the audience. To this end, arrival at your seat included discovery of your very own eye protection goggles, necessary for the “indoor tornado” finale. But it was the lighting which really brought the show together. Along with the usual stage-lighting, GEAR uses Projection Mapping to truly bring the factory to life by coordinating the projections seamlessly with both set and actors. It is difficult to describe the effect of Projection Mapping, but for GEAR it made what is ostensibly a very good talent show into a spectacular performance with a real story.



If you fancy an afternoon or evening of laughs and gasps of wonder get yourself a ticket to GEAR. The show performs twice daily Friday through Sunday (with occasional weekday shows) until the end of March. Tickets are ¥3,500–¥4,000 for adults, ¥1,500–¥2,000 for school age students, and free to 3–5 year olds. Purchase via the [website](#).

The venue, Art Complex 1928, is worthy of a visit in itself. Originally built in 1928 for newspaper Osaka Mainichi Shimbun, this unusual example of art-deco inspired architecture in the centre of Kyoto is now registered as a Kyoto City Tangible Cultural Property. It is currently home to the GEAR theatre, a couple of boutiques and some lovely independent cafes; perfect for a post-performance tipple!

*Charlotte Griffiths*  
With thanks to Tong  
at Wasabi Creation

## Plus!

Projection Mapping uses 3D, and often irregularly shaped, objects as surfaces on which to project digital images. Software calculates the size of the surface and adjusts the projected image accordingly. The technology can be used to create optical illusions and extra dimensions, and to give movement to stationary objects.

A spectacular demonstration of Projection Mapping can be seen at Osaka castle until the 16th of February from 5:30pm to 10:30pm. Visit [here](#) for tickets.



## Affirmation in Africa: Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Visit

### As with the beginning of every

new year, people everywhere look toward the future, hopeful that the year will be better and brighter than the last. Sadly in 2013 from February 16 to February 19 those hopes were cut short for 40 people when Algerian extremists attacked and overran the Tigantourine gas plant near In Amenas, Algeria in response to the French intervention in Mali. Of the forty innocent dead (not including the 29 kidnappers who also died during the crisis) only one was Algerian, the rest came from nine different countries with Japan incurring the loss of 10 victims; the highest from the crisis and the highest Japanese life loss outside of Japan since the September 11 attacks.

Last month, a day before the anniversary of the attack, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe finished a weeklong visit to the Middle East and Africa attempting to replace the pain that filled the Japanese at the start of last year with optimism for the future. Mr. Abe's tour, the first such visit in eight years by a Prime Minister of Japan, started in Oman, followed by Ivory Coast and Mozambique, and finished in Ethiopia. In each country he spoke of continued cooperation, support for infrastructure and investment, and, on his last day at the African Union Headquarters, announced an increase in aid to Africa over the next few years. Impressed? If you find yourself

shrugging and thinking not really, that's ok. It can be argued that the trip itself was fairly anticlimactic. When heads of state meet of course they are going to push for better economic and political relations, so it makes sense that Mr. Abe would visit resource-rich countries and promote stronger ties.

Yet if the trip was not necessarily impressive, it was still rather important in that it reaffirmed Mr. Abe's domestic and foreign policy aims. These general aims are promoting trade and investment, diminishing China's global influence, and establishing a more proactive role in diplomatic and security affairs around the world. Deeply connected, a loss or gain in one policy area negatively or positively affects the others. For example, if Mr. Abe succeeds in reinvigorating economic and political ties with Africa, it will increase competition with those foreign countries that also have, or hope to have, better trade and diplomatic relations there.

To point out the obvious competitor, China is currently Africa's biggest trading partner other than the European Union, giving the Chinese government quite a bit of influence in the region. A day after his trip ended, the Chinese ambassador to the African Union, already perceiving a threat to China's influence, labeled

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as a 'troublemaker' and warned African nations of his intentions. The timing of the visit adds to the sense of contention. The Prime Minister's trip began soon after his visit to the Yasukuni Shrine and war memorial in Tokyo, a visit that received harsh criticism from China and Korea and cold responses from allies like the United States. The tour also started at the tail-end of China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi's very own trip to four African nations. In this case, Japan's ability to form successful and fruitful ties in the region goes hand in hand with their effort to curb China's clout.

As a quick aside, it is well known that Africa became an arena where the Americans and Soviets continuously competed for influence during the Cold War. Both the Americans and Soviets offered enormous political (often military) and economic support to willing allies to achieve their goals. Given the increased tensions between China and Japan over the past few months, and the direction both Mr. Abe and China's president Xi Jinping seem to be taking their countries, it is not unfathomable that these two countries may face a similar rivalry on the continent in the future.

Lastly the visit can be viewed as part of Mr. Abe's continuous effort to broaden Japan's role in world affairs. More specifically, the Prime Minister wants to increase Japan's Special Defense Force's ability for collective self-defense and "proactive pacifism." While in Africa, he took the opportunity to express his concerns about the violence in the Central African Republic and South Sudan, the latter country already having Japanese forces as part of the U.N. mission. He went on to advocate for peaceful solutions to the crises. By actively and extensively supporting other nations with the SDF, as seen in Africa and in the Philippines, Mr. Abe is painting a picture of an armed, but peaceful force. These types of missions and his portrayal increase the odds that he'll be successful in amending the SDF's restrictive role as defined by the constitution in the upcoming months.

It is easy to first view the trip as ordinary and perhaps inconsequential, but when viewed as part of Mr. Abe's larger policy goals it offers a glimpse of his vision for Japan's future; a future in which Japan is an influential global force and can successfully compete with and curb China. Such a future is not easily created and faces many setbacks. For one, Mr. Abe is one man and Japan is notorious for having a "revolving door" for its prime ministers. Yet,

after many years of a sluggish economy and perceived as the United States' lackey, it is not too difficult to find others sharing his vision. As a final word of caution on Mr. Abe's attempts to expand Japan's diplomatic and economic role in world affairs, specifically in allowing the SDF more freedoms to act and assist other countries; any growth in power may further open Japan up to similar threats witnessed last year in Algeria. Instances like the In Amenas hostage crisis and the mid-December stabbing of a Japanese diplomat in Yemen are part of the inherent dangers of a broad global presence. A consequence many Japanese would probably rather do without.

*Sean Mulvihill*



## Sapporo's Cuisine

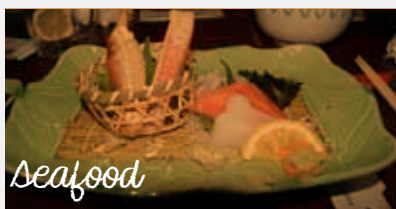
Last February I ventured north to Hokkaido for the famed Yuki Matsuri. Admittedly the sculptures were very impressive, the snow slides worth their two hour queues and the atmosphere buzzing. But even though I am a snow-junkie, the festival is not something I feel the need to visit again. The local food, however, demands a return visit (or three).



Ramen

Although loved the country over, ramen is often thought of as a Hokkaido specialty. Sapporo is known for miso broths, Asahikawa soy, and Hakodate salt.

My ramen experience in Sapporo was a pivotal point in my Japanese culinary adventure. In Susukino, a Yuki Matsuri host district, the conveniently located Yokochō (known as ramen alley) made a steaming bowl of noodles the obvious choice to defrost after a few hours admiring ice in the biting cold. The key Hokkaidan difference is that you can have your ramen topped with a knob of local butter. For me this unassuming melting addition transformed a hearty bowl of glorified soup into pure ambrosia, nectar of the gods, consommé of kings... I saw my senses, came to the light, mixed my metaphors, drained the dregs and left, delirious on cholesterol, reborn as a ramen lover.



Seafood

The cold waters surrounding Japan's northern island are renowned for their high quality, fresh seafood. Highlights include sea urchin, salmon roe, squid and scallops, but no trip would be complete without sampling some Hokkaido crab.

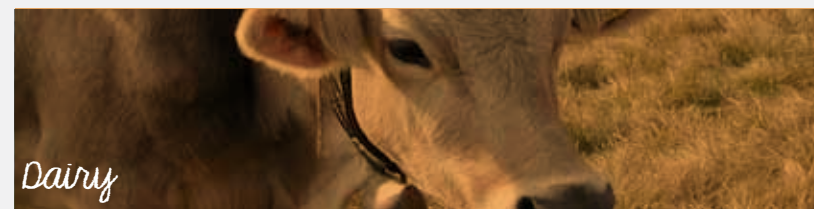
For a crustacean feast book in at Kani-Honke where in the entrance you will walk past pools filled with the different crabs for you to choose your supper from. I recommend the seven course dinner set which includes crab risotto, crab gratin, tofu in crab broth and crab legs which come with tools to scrape out the flesh: DIY sashimi!



Mongolian Khan

No, not the founder of the Mongol empire, but his helmet... Yet another delicacy of Hokkaido is lamb, and you wouldn't want to cook it just any old way now would you? In Sapporo, instead of the boring old yakiniku grill you sear slivers of lamb on a table-top cooker in the shape of the famed Hun's helmet. Why? Who cares!

Take yourself to the Sapporo beer factory museum where, after passing the informative displays (all in Japanese so feel no guilt for whizzing through), indulge in a sampler set of their finest libations. Then, thirst quenched move onto the next cavernous hall for the main event. Order a selection of lamb platters, some sides if you must, and cook to your preference. Make sure you use the plastic bags supplied upon entrance to the restaurant; they will prevent your coat absorbed the smell of grilled meat – although the scent proves pleasantly nostalgic for some. My meal here was conducted in concentrated silence, apt for my first taste of lamb in seven months.



Dairy

Hokkaido's extensive countryside, a vast contrast to the urban sprawl and impregnable mountains of Honshu, enables its huge dairy industry to thrive. About half Japan's milk comes from Hokkaido, 60% of which is sold for drinking, and the rest used to produce delectable products like butter cheese, ice cream and yoghurt.

Dairy is not a big part of Japanese cooking, but is often craved by those with a western palate. Sapporo's New Chitose airport is therefore the perfect place to stock up on all things milk based before returning south. Omiyage of note includes plastic wrapped balls of sweet cream cheese for your favourite colleagues, and the smoked camembert is a real treat. It goes without saying that the gift wrapping includes cooler packs when needed.



Curry

A final foodie stop from Sapporo comes in the form of Indian curry. Not perhaps what you expect to find in the northern realms of Nippon, but Hoheikyo Onsen and its Indian restaurant deserve a visit. An 80min bus ride out of downtown Sapporo and through the countryside to nearby mountains will bring you to Trip Advisor's number one onsen in Japan. Here you can relax your muscles in one of Japan's largest onsen whilst enjoying panoramic views of the snow-filled valley. Follow bathing up with a delicious curry and huge naan in the onsen's Indian restaurant; the perfect way to defrost from all the snow festival shenanigans.

Charlotte Griffiths



## Unite Against Unitaskers

I've never watched cooking shows with any degree of commitment, but I often use Food Network's website for recipes; since its contributions are almost entirely made by professional chefs with strong reputations, they are more likely to taste decent when a schmuck like me attempts to replicate them. Their large staff of celebrity chefs all have brands to maintain, and this is reflected in their distinct styles of cooking. After enough mining of the catalog on the site, I found myself eventually gravitating to one chef's recipes over all the others: Alton Brown. His respect for freshness, quality and simplicity resonates with me.

It was no surprise, then, that his name came up in my research for this month's Miso Green. In this article, I have been planning to talk about my love for products that serve multiple purposes (I even made my own futon sofa after being unable to find one here), and compare it to my disdain for the myriad niche inventions that are cleverly marketed to convince people that a fairly simple task needs to be completed in an even simpler way. I feel like Japan is particularly bad about this. I can walk into a store and pick out dozens of plastic pieces of junk that do only one thing. In a 15 minute trip to Himeji's small Tokyu Hands, these standouts caught my eye: The "thumb thing," which you put

on your thumb to hold your book open while reading; an electric eye relaxing mask; all manner of head massagers; a cheek exerciser that looks like an adult pacifier; a pair of special tongs for removing gas cassettes from portable stoves; microwave potato chip and naan makers; and various plastic contraptions for cute-ing up bentos. While they are all conceptually interesting, I can imagine that very few of them would be used daily by their purchasers. Besides these, Japan also makes a culture of ingenious yet useless inventions. They're everywhere, and it's maddening.

Alton Brown fights this same battle, and has coined a term for these one-job tools: the **unitaskers**. He constantly bashes appliances that were created for one reason, and contests that in almost every case, there is a multi-purpose tool that not just does the same job, but often does it better. He professes that the only unitasker he keeps in his home kitchen is the fire extinguisher.

I could bash unitaskers until the cows come home, but instead I'll focus on multitaskers. They're the real heroes of eliminating unnecessary waste, and deserve more attention.

### Pressure Cooker

Anyone concerned about the world's energy usage should immediately pick up a pressure cooker. They cook brown rice in a third of the time that a rice cooker does, cook unsoaked beans in half an hour or less, and much, much more. They can be a little terrifying at first, but once you get to know yours, they become an indispensable tool in the kitchen.

**Use instead of:**  
Rice cookers, slow cookers, saucepans (in most situations)

### Kotatsu

They do more than warm your feet in the winter – they are also the prime environment for preparing fermented foods. Under a kotatsu you can make yogurt, proof bread and bloom koji for making miso and doburoku (homemade sake).

**Use instead of:** yogurt makers

### French press

If there is any kitchen appliance I hate, it's the drip coffee machine. Nothing makes becoming a habitual coffee drinker less appealing than their smell. Somehow French presses are easier to keep clean, and their ingenious design eliminates the need for disposable filters. But you can use French presses for more than just coffee – tea is another



obvious use, but you can also use them for infusing oils and liquors, frothing milk, making whipped cream, and straining foods.

**Use instead of:**  
milk steamer, pitcher, tea bags

### Silicone baking cups

Normally, I discourage the use of silicone over metal, but in one particular case, I think that silicone serves a better purpose than the only plastic alternative – ice cube trays. Plastic ice trays are fragile and impractical, but silicone bakeware, which was made to handle heat, also stands up to cold and makes ice better than conventional ice trays.

**Use instead of:** ice trays

### Cowl / hat combo

Despite growing up in a tropical environment, I always found an excuse to wear a scarf. I've loved them for years. But in this most recent winter, I've started to feel that they're rather impractical. The warmest ones are often too bulky. Cowls are therefore an excellent alternative, and they are inconspicuous enough that you can wear them in the

classroom. Some cowls even have drawstrings built into them, giving you the option of using them as a hat as well. This is perfect for me; since my winter coat has a neck warmer built into it, I don't need a cowl while outdoors, so I can use it as a hat en route to work, and then pull it down for ventures into freezing classrooms. It's a single accessory that I can use nearly all day.

**Use instead of:** beanies, scarves

### Suribachi / surigoki

These comprise of a Japanese mortar and pestle, but I find them far more effective than their Western counterparts. The suribachi's ridged surface allows for more efficient grinding, and so it can replace many electronic devices with minimal effort added.

**Use instead of:** spice grinder, coffee grinder, garlic press

### Tension rods

In our apartments there seems to be little need for telescoping shower rods, but in spaces so small, getting a few can add a lot of storage space.

They have a high weight tolerance, so you can use them to hang a lot of heavy stuff, including clothing and pots and pans, some of which will add decorative flare to your living space. They're also a great alternative for nails and hooks when you live in an apartment with restrictions about wall holes.

**Use instead of:** clothesline, hanging hooks, cabinets

These are just a few less-than-obvious examples of multitaskers, and there are myriad more. Of course, any unitasker is worth owning if you plan to use it enough, but if it's only occasional or to be purchased as a novelty, perhaps it's worth rethinking. The versatility of any item is a key factor in determining your need for any other. So whenever you shop, think past the obvious.

**Think: how else can I use this?**

*Ulu Mills*

[miso.green.ht@gmail.com](mailto:miso.green.ht@gmail.com)



## 総持寺 Souji-ji

### Our journey takes us next to

Souji-ji, a temple on the north east side of Osaka-fu and the 22nd temple on the route if you go in numerical order. There is a forest walking trail connecting this temple to last month's Katsuo-ji. Souji-ji is the size of an unassuming city temple, but once inside, you'll discover several features unique to Souji-ji amongst those temples collected on this pilgrimage.

The Honzon, or main image dedicated at this temple, is of a Senju (thousand-armed) Kannon riding on the back of a turtle. It is said to be the original image carved over a period of 1,000 days by a mysterious youth in the 9th century. During the civil wars, an attack by Oda Nobunaga had Souji-ji burned down, but only the lower half of the sacred image was burned; the upper half was said to have given off a golden glow. So, it is also

called "Hibushi Kannon," or the Kannon who submitted to the fire. Like many fire-surviving sacred images, it has become a protector against disaster, especially fire. The image is put on display for five days each year (this year from April 15th to 21st).

The Honzon's depiction of Kannon riding on the back of a turtle has to do with the founding legend of the temple. Founder Chunagon Yamakage Fujiwara (also known as Masatomo Fujiwara) is considered the originator of Japanese cooking and is the patron deity of chefs. About a thousand years ago, when his father Takafusa was getting ready to board a ship on the Yodogawa he saw some fishermen had caught a large turtle which was probably going to be killed. Dedicated to Kannon and compassion, he purchased the turtle and set it

free in the river. The next day as he boarded the ship, he was told his young son had fallen overboard (actually he was thrown by his wicked stepmother, but that's neither here nor there). Takafusa prayed to Kannon that he would build a temple to share Kannon's compassionate nature with others if she would be able to save his son now. And who should appear just then but the little boy, borne up through the water by the very turtle Takafusa had just saved!

Because of this part of the founding story, the temple has a close connection to animals. There is a large turtle pond on the grounds (which also serves as a Benzaiten shrine site), and while many temples are joined to cemeteries and offer rites for the deceased, Souji-ji is the only temple on the pilgrimage to feature a pet cemetery. Souji-ji offers services for pet memorials, and you can also find amulets for pets in the temple shop.

The story goes on to tell that Takafusa vowed to build a temple in gratitude, and sent a priest to China to carve a Kannon image for his proposed temple. That priest went to China to get sandalwood, but wasn't able to ship it back because of embargoes, so instead the priest threw the log of sandalwood into the sea. Years later, after Takafusa's death when Yamakage had taken over, he found the log washed up

on the beach and decided to fulfill his father's vow.

Yamakage tried to take the log to Kyoto to get it carved, but when he reached the location of Souji-ji, the log became too heavy to be moved. He prayed and prayed some more, and was instructed by Hase Kannon to build his temple on that location; there was no sculptor available to make the image, so Hase Kannon instructed him to ask the next person he saw to be the one to do the carving. A youth of about 14 appeared (said to be a keshin, or incarnation of Kannon), and said he would complete the carving on the condition that over the 1,000 days it would take to complete the image, Yamakage would provide him something different to eat every day.

Yearly on April 18th (in the middle of the Kannon-display days), there is a ceremony called Hochoshiki at Souji-ji for the "Way of the Knife" as started by Yamakage, father of sushi and Japanese cuisine; it involves slicing and presenting fish in a flowing and artful way. There is also a knife dedication place (Hochozuka) at the temple for restaurants or families to dedicate knives once they have become unusable.

As for February, there is of course a Setsubun celebration on the 3rd, but it is otherwise a quiet month.

Finally, we have our standards, the front gates and the temple bell (ring it, but gently, as it is super old, the sign says). As seen at some other temples, there is a Mizuko Jizo (patron of the water babies), and the rarer Bokefuji Kannon (protector against senile dementia). Souji-ji is part of a Bokefuji Kannon pilgrimage (of which Imakumano Kannonji is also a part). Inside the Fubi-Kannon-Do (Hall of the Universal Compassion Kannon) you will find the miniature pilgrimage symbolizing all 33 temples.

Souji-ji is easily accessible at a five minute walk from the Hankyu Kyoto Line Sojiji Station. Entrance to the temple is by personal donation, and hours are 6:00 to 17:00.

The Souji-ji main page is [here](#), for more information and photos of the knife ceremony [here](#).

*Emily Lemmon*





## *"Active Pacifism" Drivers, Decisions, and Direction of Japanese Defense Reform*

### **Since sweeping back into power**

in December 2012's lower house victory, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has pursued a series of reforms aimed at keeping his increasingly marginalized country a tier-one power. Among these efforts, Abe's plan for reviving the long-stagnant Japanese economy, dubbed "Abenomics", has received the most attention.

In the past several months, however, attention has begun to shift toward his government's ambitious plans for defense reform. These include a National Security Council (NSC) designed to help Japan better coordinate its defense and diplomacy, revised National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) outlining military strategy and force structure planning over the next ten years, and the first ever National Security Strategy (NSS) explaining Japan's comprehensive foreign policy. The new, more assertive national security policy supported by these reforms has been described by Abe as "active pacifism."

Abe's historic opportunity to reset Japan's national security policy results from a confluence of international and domestic drivers. The most material of the international drivers is undoubtedly the growing threat of China. The past several years have seen a rise in tensions between the two Asian powers, coming to a head in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute.

The recently released NSS and NDPG confirm China's central role in Tokyo's plans to bolster its defense, emphasizing Chinese military activity near the disputed islands and China's recent imposition of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ).

An important but more ambiguous international driver is the state of the U.S. – Japan alliance. The NSS argues that Japan needs to make a more "proactive contribution to peace", committing more to its military alliance with the United States. While this move reflects American pressure, it may also reflect Japan's growing insecurity as to whether the United States will – or can – honor its security assurances, with the United States' lack of demand for China to rescind its ADIZ playing on these fears.

While China and the United States serve as international drivers for Japanese defense reform, Japan's domestic politics provides the logistics for these changing policies. A shift toward a more conservative public attitude, along with frustration over the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)'s leadership, resulted in a decisive victory for Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). With both the lower house and upper house under their coalition's control, the LDP is now comparatively free to apply their conservative mandate in pursuit of defense reform.

Abe himself, who determinately came into his position with the personal goal of Japan becoming a "normal country", heightens the shift toward a more assertive national security policy. His surprise decision to visit Yasakuni Shrine suggests that, despite a recent trend of realism, Abe's personal ideology will continue to have a bearing on Japan's political trajectory.

All of these drivers have paved the way for a number of developments. Japan will pursue a 5% increase in defense spending for the next five years, leveraging the Japanese lead in technology and focusing on Chinese vulnerabilities. In practice, this means the development of a marine corps, integration of unmanned drones, strengthened real-time military intelligence capacity, and an operational commitment to respond effectively and immediately to Chinese intrusions into disputed air and maritime space.

Concerns about the extremity of potential defense developments persist, particularly in light of Abe's widely panned visit to Yasakuni Shrine. In this more assertive vein, the Abe administration has promised to review Japan's ban on arms exports. However, the more controversial pursuit of "first strike" military capability has been left out of the

current plans. Additionally, while Abe predicted in his New Year's comments that the country's war-renouncing constitution "will have been revised" by 2020, the current plans make no mention of this. Abe is expected to aim to lift Japan's ban on exercising the right to collective self-defense, but has delayed this decision until after the passage of next year's budget in April due to opposition by LDP coalition partner New Komeito. Furthermore, while there had been some concern that Abe was going to pursue aggressive defense reform at the expense of the economy, his recent statement that "The Abe administration's top priority will continue to be economic revitalization in the coming year" provides hope for moderation.

The result of Abe's defense reform, then, is a generally pragmatic national security agenda that builds on the direction set by Abe's predecessor, Yoshihiko Noda. Per U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, Japan is set to play "a more modern, engaged role." The task for Japan's partners – most principally the United States – is to help Japan keep this agenda pragmatic and progressing by addressing the primary drivers of Japan's defense reform.

While China's rise and insecurity about the United States have been useful proponents of Japanese defense reform, Japan must be reassured on both fronts to guard against potentially destructive insecure behavior. To keep defense reform on track, realist Abe must be kept on track and in a strong position. Paradoxically, this depends most of all on encouraging a maintained focus on the economy, a move that will provide the political popularity necessary for Abe's defense reforms to run their course while simultaneously turning Abe's gaze from more extreme national security options. Ultimately, in assisting with Japan's development of an effective and realistic national security policy, Japan's partners can give credence to Abe's claim that "Japan is back," while maintaining regional security.

*Taylor M. Wettach*



## Gigging in Japan: Phoenix

### Back home I was a frequent

gig-goer. I enjoyed summer festivals filled with music and moshpits. Since my move to Japan, the meaning of 'summer festival' has somewhat changed; cue yukatas and bon dances. But good music travels far, so I occasionally peruse the net hoping for familiar bands to fly to this side of the world. The first hit I got was Two Door Cinema Club. They played Osaka ([check out my review](#)) back in December 2012. There were some major differences to gigs back home; the silence between songs, the religious, synchronized clapping and the fact that they start and end pretty early. My second gig here was that of a British singer, Gabrielle Aplin. I was expecting the same crowd participation as at Two Door, but at cozy venue Umeda Akaso, an eclectic mix of people from salarymen to students, came to support the kawaii Gabby. This time there were more woops and roars and cheers and response from the Japanese crowd. This gave me hope for Phoenix.

**Phoenix:** Thomas Mars, Deck d'Arcy, Christian Mazzalai and Laurent Brancowitz make up this foursome from France who have danced their way round the globe and have even managed to jig through Osaka and Tokyo.

Their music is alternative, fresh and simply catchy. I was introduced to them only weeks before I committed to see them.

When I went to see these mighty Parisian boys last month, I didn't know what to expect. On Sunday 12th February, the IMP hall in Osaka Business Park filled with hipsters, merchandise-ridden fans, a few oldies and us. The carpeted venue had a no drinks policy; to gig without a beer in hand is culture shock in itself. Doors were at 5 (mecha early or what) and the show started at 6 (on the dot). As the lights dimmed and the band came on stage, the crowd fled to the front in unison as if everyone was in on it but us. The wave motion was a friendly, nostalgic surprise. There was life and personality to these Phoenix fans and they were ready to dance!

Popular songs like Lisztomania and Lasso caused bursts of movement and fist pumping from all of us, complementing greatly with the on-cue pyrotechnics. I have to hand it to the tech team, they put on a good show.

Lead singer Thomas was a crowd pleaser, at every opportunity he'd wrap his mic lead round himself for safety and lean into the crowd so his followers could have a grope

and a feel. By the end, he had even dived in head first for a bit of crowd surfing. I'm not sure this particular crowd could handle his spontaneity as most of the side crowd had to run in to help keep him swimming!

There was a mix of instrumentals, creepy-eye guitar solos (don't ask), domo arigatous, songs that made you throw your arms up and songs that made your head sway. The Phoenix bunch were great entertainers and encored with my favourite song, If I Ever Feel Better. Though their vocals weren't always pitch perfect, the charm, effort and genki performance they gave really got the crowd going and became my favourite gig in Japan. Catch them at [Summer Sonic](#) this August - a summer festival that does not include shrine carrying!

*Cherie Pham*

### Five Tips

for when losing your Japan gig-viewing virginity:

- 1 Start time means start time. If it says "show time: 6pm" it means 6pm, you should know by now that Japan runs like clockwork.
- 2 Door time. The time the doors open is usually shown on your ticket. It's a good chance to buy merchandise and figure out where the lockers are pre-show.
- 3 Ticket number. Be aware, although there is a door time you may be waiting outside for a bit for your ticket number to be called. So if you're number "1036" you probably won't be getting in first.
- 4 "But back home..." No. You are not back home, so if it doesn't specifically list a support act, there won't be one; if it says no drinking, don't drink, and if the 'cloakroom' is an organized pile of ¥500 garbage bags, then go with it.
- 5 Find a show. Check out [creativeman](#) for gig listings in English!





## Where are they now?

### In the January issue we featured three inspiring

Hyogo alumni who are finding their feet immediately post-JET. This month, with the dreaded recontracting papers handed in, I thought it apt to think about the potential long-term effects of our time here. As such I spoke to my cousin Jane, from whom came my first awareness of the JET programme back in 1995 when I was just 6 years old.

Jane Rice-Bowen (née Rice) hails from the UK where she currently lives with her husband and adorable twins in London. She was a JET participant in Sakaide city of Kagawa prefecture on Shikoku from July 1995 through July 1998.

*Charlotte Griffiths*

### *Why did you apply to JET?*

In about the 3rd week of my law degree I realized I was never going to be a lawyer. The big plan for my future that had been nurtured by my Dad, my teachers and to some extent me began to crumble before my very eyes. I had no idea what I was going to do and when I was going to tell everyone that I wasn't going to be who they expected me to be. I carried on with my studies and tried to think of another plan.

Meanwhile my best friend was studying Japanese and through her I began to get glimpses of Japan. She'd been on a term long exchange to Osaka and had great tales to tell. Then she went out to Gifu for her third year while I prepared for my finals. This was in the days before the internet and email so we wrote long letters on thin blue airmail paper and while I babbled on about boys and parties and exam stress she was climbing Mount Fuji, doing tea ceremony classes and regaling me with the many different kinds of vending machines there are.

Then she told me about the JET Programme and I realized that this was the Plan B.

It was perfect; I could earn money doing something I already knew I enjoyed (I'd taught at an English language summer school while I was at uni and I was a rowing coach, so teaching held no fear); I could see some of the world (I'd regretted not having a gap year and doing some travelling) and I could get some perspective on my life and work out what I really wanted to do.

### *What types of school did you teach at?*

I taught at a Commercial High School (Sakaide Shogyo Koko) where the predominantly female students were learning skills that they would need to work in offices. Two days a week I went to Hanzan High School which was an agricultural school with an additional stream of very well turned out would-be nurses.

### *We're told that JET has changed a lot over the years, what do you remember about teaching in Japan back in the mid 1990s?*

It was boiling in the summer. I remember looking out over a sea of 40 lethargic students melting into their desks while the cicadas droned on in the background. In contrast the winter was arctic and you could see your breath in the classroom. The soundtrack to the winter was chattering teeth. *(No change there then!)*

I remember sitting in a foggy staffroom while the Head of English chained smoked next to me.

I remember the local fire brigade bringing an earthquake truck for us all to practice in and the Kocho-sensei saying to me in his well-meaning broken English; "Eto ne Jane-sensei, does the earth move for you in England?" Poor man couldn't understand why I turned red and started choking with laughter.



### *What did you hope to gain doing JET? Did you?*

#### **A plan for the future.**

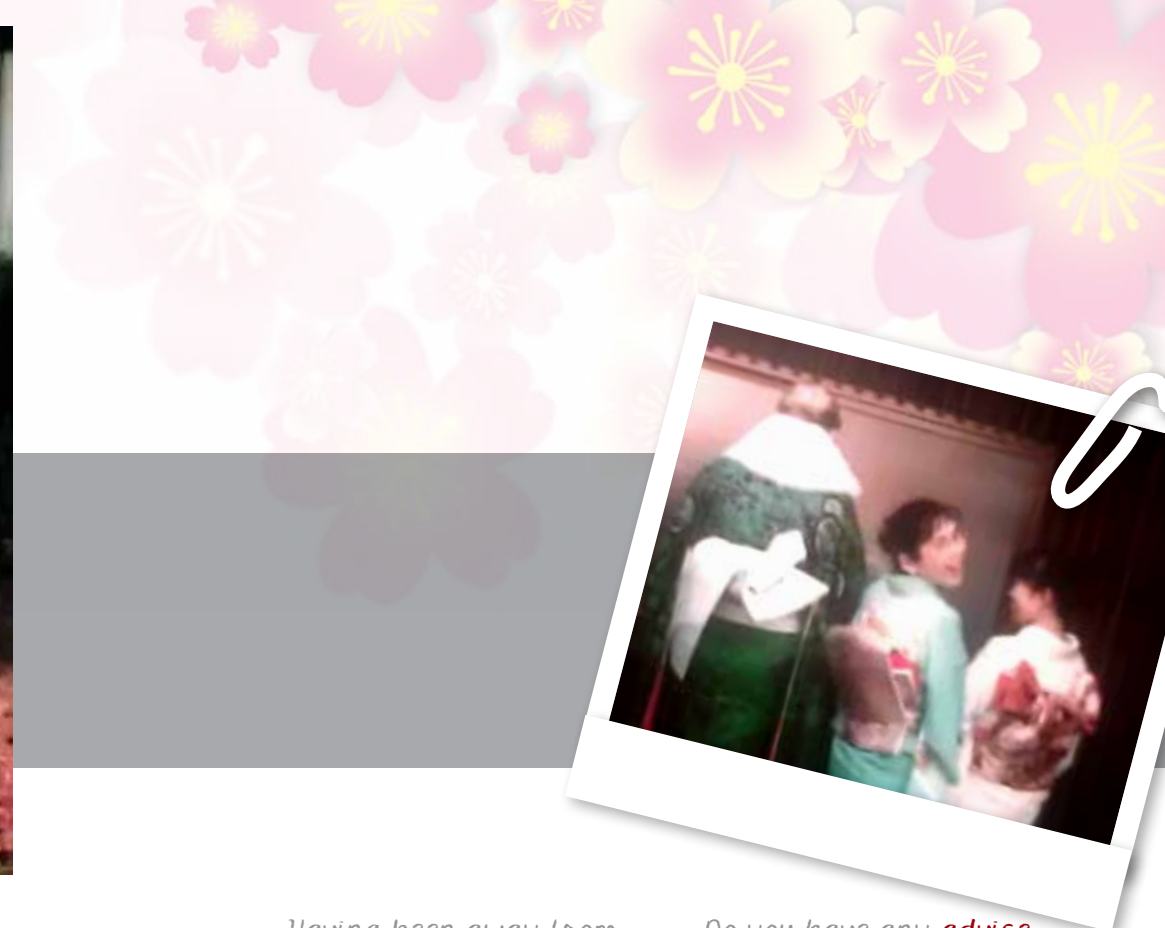
JET changed my life for the better in so many ways. I spent three years in an extraordinary country that was so unlike my own and I not only survived, I thrived. I arrived with no Japanese and by the time I left (while nowhere near fluent) I could get myself into and out of any situation! That gave me incredible confidence in my ability to communicate which has carried through to the rest of my life.

I saved enough money to study for a Masters which then enabled me to follow the career I wanted (still not a lawyer!).

The thing that I perhaps didn't expect to gain was the bunch of life-long friends who I met in Japan and who are still in my life. These are the Japanese, American, Irish, Canadian and Kiwi people who I shared such brilliant times with that we will always be friends. Whenever

we can we meet (trickier now as we have lots of small children between us) and it is so much easier to keep in touch now than 20 years ago.





*What's your favourite memory of Japan?*

There are so many to choose from! I suppose that my favourite memory is four of us piling into my car before daybreak on a Saturday morning to follow a typhoon because my friend Roisin was a surfer and she really wanted to catch some big waves. What followed was the kind of ridiculous road trip you only get in movies. Totally reckless but utterly brilliant.

*Did you experience reverse culture shock when you returned home?*

Yes, it was awful.

Everyone was so noisy, no-one understood personal space and there were far too many breakfast cereals to choose from.

I felt bereft for a while but as with all things time healed and it passed.

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*What did you do immediately after leaving JET?*

I went to Malaysia for a month and travelled with a friend who came out to meet me from England. It was a bit like going into a decompression chamber.

*Can you summarise your career path since JET?*

On my return I embarked on a Masters in Theatre for Development examining what constitutes poverty and how the Arts can help to alleviate cultural and spiritual poverty while having an improving impact on social and economic deprivation indicators. As part of my MA I spent three months doing field research on a Native Canadian Reservation in Alberta.

I believe implicitly in the power of the Arts to change lives and empower people and communities.

With this in mind I began a career in Arts Education working in regional theatres as an Education Officer. I moved into venue management in 2001 and ran an arts centre and then a music venue, during this period I did everything from producing pantomimes to staging rock concerts.

In 2005 I became the Chief Executive of Circus Space which is the UK's National Centre for Circus Arts. Housed in a magnificent Victorian Power Station in East London Circus Space involves thousands of people in the creation and performance of Circus Arts every year. In 2012 we trained 45 deaf and disabled artists to perform as part

of the Opening Ceremony for the Paralympic Games. This year we have been awarded National status and will become the National Centre for Circus Arts.

Essentially, I ran away and joined the circus.

*How has the experience of living in Japan helped or changed you and/or your perceptions?*

I had always been a very direct person who tackled things head on, some might say like a bull in a china shop. My time in Japan taught me that there are many ways to solve a problem and sometimes the long way round is the quickest.

*Having been away from Japan for a fair few years now, is there anything you still miss about Japan?*

I missed the food dreadfully but now London is awash with terrific Japanese food, so I am well catered for. When I started to hunt for some photos for you I was also reminded as I searched that the one thing I still really miss is Hanami parties. Catching sight of a cherry blossom tree in spring always takes me back to Japan.

For a while I missed being surprised every day. It was a remarkable thing to be in a place that was so alien that even the most mundane things were extraordinary; being back in the UK felt very dull. I've rediscovered that sense of wonder since I had my kids.

*Do you have any advice for A&Ts moving home and thinking about their post-JET careers?*

You have been to the other side of the world and lived in an amazing place and had an incredible experience. This sets you apart. Do something that you really want to do.

Don't settle.



The calendar for Hyogo Times is designed and maintained by Paige Ngo!

# February

Hyogo AJET event

Hanshin

Harima

Kobe

Tamba

Awaji

Tajima

Outside of Hyogo

Sunday

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

Saturday

1 JLPT results can be seen

First day of Lantern Festival (Nagasaki)

2014 雪合戦大会 (Snowball Fight Tournament)



Advanced ticket sales for sumo in Osaka start

3 Ikuta Shrine Setsubun bean-throwing ceremony (Kobe)

*Setsubun*

4



65th Sapporo Yuki Matsuri

7

8

9

10

11 *National Foundation Day*

64th Sapporo Yuki Matsuri

14 *Valentine's Day*

Last day of Lantern Festival (Nagasaki)

15 Saidaiji Eyo Hadaka, Okayama (naked man festival)

First day the 8th Tenmatenjin Umeshu Convention

16

17

18

19

Mt. Rokko Ice Festival

After JET Conference (Yokohama)

Shitenno-ji Temple market (Osaka)

23 Last day of the 8th Tenmatenjin Umeshu Convention (Osaka)

24

25

26

27

28

Mt. Rokko Ice Festival

Kawasaki Ninja Motorcycle Fair (Kobe)

AJET Hyogo Ski/Snowboard Trip (Hachikogen/Hachikita)



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黒ラベル

クラシック

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Kanpai and goodbye to winter!