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Yuki Matsuri: A Winter Wonderland
February's Fantastic Four: Concerts in Review
Travel: Myanmar

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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

Message from the Editor:

hello!

March in Japan is an incredibly difficult month to define and I can't tell if it is one of the best or worst. With winter still lingering and spring not completely established (though my renewed runny nose and itchy eyes seem to say differently), March can be an enormously relaxing period or one of tremendous boredom. Classes are over and you would love to take days off, but maybe you are stuck in the office due to the many days of nenkyu you enjoyed when you went home over winter break. Or perhaps you're just saving those days to take a vacation at the end of the month. Whatever your reasons for still being at work during this month are, it can be a long, drawn-out period leaving you with little or no motivation to be productive. I can only offer a few ideas to keep you busy and entertained, rather than sleepy at your desk.

First, classes are over and you deserve a reward for your hard work. The first thing that comes to mind is obvious, go travel! For those of you with nenkyu to spare, give yourself a vacation during spring break and live it up like your college days. Review the Hyogo Times' numerous travel reviews and pick the destination that fits your mood. If you're hoping to stay around here and save your nenkyu catch classical forms of entertainment by seeing a **Takarazuka Revue Show** (a number of AJET Block 6 members already have their tickets!) or the Osaka Sumo wrestling tournament. If you want something more modern look into the **Nipponbashi Festival**, one of Osaka's biggest cosplay events, as well as this year's **PunkSpring**. While you're planning one trip, keep going and lay out your itinerary for Golden Week in May. This year we will have a five day weekend and you can be sure that domestic travel will be overwhelming. However, if you reserve your flights and accommodation well in advance (now!), you'll avoid much of the stress and disappointment that comes with the

last-minute planning and having to settle for your fourth pick travel destination.

If all your travel needs have been met, it's time to think about that place we spend most of our time when we aren't traveling – our schools. For first year JETs coming at the start of the second term last year, having an outline for your new year is especially important, even more so if you are in charge of the lessons. If you're leaving after the first term, how are you setting your successor up for success? Write them a guide and let them know what you've been working on and what worked for you in the past so they aren't left reinventing the wheel. Even more important for those of us leaving is to start the preliminary job and education hunt now. Find out when applications open, when deadlines are, and send those resumes. Yes planning a week getaway is important, but probably not as important as your future.

Finally, if all the above has been thoughtfully planned you can always study Japanese, read a book, read this issue of Hyogo Times, or better yet, write an article for next month's issue. This month we grace you with not one, but three travel reviews: regular contributor Brittany covers **Melaka and Singapore**, graphics editor Erika discusses **Myanmar**, and Rackle tackles the **AJET Block 6 Yuki Matsuri Trip**. Helen gives us not one, but three (there must be something about March being the third month) **ways to cook with shio-koji** and your usual contributors show you how they've been staying productive. Enjoy and good luck staying busy, as a friend once said, "When I keeps it movin' that means there ain't no stopping' me. Constant motivation, the god fiend bury kings."

Sean Mulvihill



hello!

Message from the Prefectural Representative

Well, winter is finally coming to a close. We had the HAJET ski trip on the weekend of February 28. Fortunately, Saturday was freshly fallen snow and a sunny day. Not bad conditions for our skiing and snowboarding. Unfortunately, Sunday was rainy and warm. Instead of hitting the slopes, we headed to the local Chorakuji temple to see Muraoka's big Buddhas. While we couldn't get our ski trip to be a complete success, everyone seemed to have a great time. I guess it really is the end to the winter sport season. Spring is coming with its warm weather and beautiful flower blossoms and there is a lot to do. Why not get out of that winter funk with a new sport? Running!

That's right. All over the prefecture there are marathon events with application deadlines approaching. With a range from 5k to full marathon, anyone can join. The running community in Japan is super friendly and always welcoming. Why not burn off some of that winter fat and bust that school year turnover stress with some running. Below is a list of just some of the marathons' names, lengths, and dates. If you are interested, why not get a group together and sign up. Try contacting people in your area. It's a great way to spend a sunny spring weekend! For more information on the application, contact me at amwindeler@gmail.com

Unicef Cup Gshiya International Fun Run
10k & Half - April 12th

Mikibosai Spring Marathon
5k/10k/Half/Full - April 19th

Relay Marathon Festa in Kakogama
May 5th

Shinosen Marathon
3k/5k/10k/Half - May 24th

Tataragi Dam Marathon
2k/5k/10k/Half - June 7th

Zankoku Marathon
24k - June 8th

Kanabe Marthon
5k/10k/Half - June 21st

Anastasia Windeler



Osaka Castle Plum Blossoms

photo
spread



Photos by
Erika Horwege

3 Easy Ways with Shio-Koji

When you think of Japanese food, you'd be forgiven if "fermented foods" is not what comes to mind. However, staples in the Japanese kitchen such as soy sauce, miso, sake, mirin (sweet cooking wine) and rice vinegar are all fermented foods. This month I want to introduce you to a lesser known, traditional Japanese ingredient called shio-koji (塩麹).

Shio-koji is a coarse paste that is made from fermenting koji (rice inoculated with a special type of fungus) salt and water. The end result is a mild salty-sweet paste that is packed with enzymes and umami.

"Uma-what?" Actually, you are all probably familiar with the mass produced version of umami, MSG. Umami is used to describe the fifth category of tastes (the others being sweet, salty, sour and bitter). It can be translated from Japanese as "deliciousness" or "good savoury taste". Coined in 1908 by a chemist at Tokyo University, it has only been recognised by western scientists in recent years although it has its sceptics, too.

So going back to shio-koji, that umami means it enhances the flavour of foods and is great as a marinade for fish or meat. It can be used to make quick pickles (tsukemono) or salad dressings and can essentially be used as a salt substitute, lowering the overall salt content of dishes. There was a shio-koji craze in Japan a few years ago and for good reason. Not only is it incredibly versatile and tastes great but it's good for you, too (the health benefits of fermented foods requires a whole other article).

Amongst other things, shio-koji has been described as the new MSG, the next soy sauce and the miracle condiment. Luckily for those of us living in Japan, it's readily available in most supermarkets and isn't very expensive. I imagine it's harder to get outside Japan so I definitely encourage you to try it while you're here.

There are countless recipes out there but here are 3 simple ones I like to get you started. Happy experimenting!

Helen Yuan



1. Grilled Salmon

The shio-koji and mirin mixture tenderises the fish and when grilled, it caramelises, resulting in a mild teriyaki-like flavour.

- >> Serves 1
- >> Prep time: 5 minutes (plus ½ hour marinating time)
- >> Cooking time: 6-8 minutes

Ingredients

- >> 1 small piece of salmon
- >> 1 Tbsp. shio-koji
- >> 1 tsp. mirin (sweet cooking wine, optional but adds a subtle sweetness)

Method

One Mix the shio-koji and mirin in a small bowl.

Two Spread mixture on both sides of the fish and marinate for around ½ an hour. (If you don't have time it's fine to grill it straight away but it will be less tender and have less flavour.)

Three Grill on medium heat for around 4-5 minutes or until browned. Turn the fish over and grill for a further 2-3 minutes or until browned to your liking. Keep a close eye on it after turning as it can burn easily.

Four It's delicious with some steamed rice and a salad or some blanched greens.

Quick Tip

I usually line the tray under my grill with foil to make cleaning easier.

2. Daikon, Cucumber and Carrot Pickle

This fresh, crunchy and delicious pickle goes well with a heavy meal or is good as a healthy snack.

- >> Serves 1-2 as a side dish
- >> Prep time: 5-10 minutes (plus an hour marinating time)

Ingredients

- >> 2 x 1.5cm slices of daikon, peeled (large white Japanese radish)
- >> dash of chilli flakes or ½ a small dried red chilli, finely chopped
- >> 6 thin slices of carrot
- >> 1 cucumber
- >> 1 Tbsp. shio-koji
- >> ½ tsp. sesame oil
- >> ¼ Tbsp. white vinegar (I used rice vinegar)

Method

One Trim the ends of the cucumber and peel if desired. Cut a small piece diagonally, slightly rotate the cucumber and cut diagonally. Continue cutting this way until the whole cucumber has been cut.

Two Cut each daikon slice into 3 lengths, and cut each piece in the same way as the cucumber.

Three Cut the carrot slices into very fine strips.

Four Place all the ingredients in a ziplock bag and gently massage the vegetables to coat them with the sauce. Squeeze out the air, seal it, and place in the fridge. For best results, refrigerate for at least an hour and eat within 1-2 days.

Quick Tips

- >> For a stripy effect for the cucumbers, alternate between peeling and not peeling the skin.
- >> You can just cut the cucumber into thick slices and cube the daikon if you prefer but the rangiri method of cutting described above creates more surface area so the flavours can be better absorbed. Plus it looks nice.
- >> If you don't have ziplock bags just combine the ingredients in a bowl and cover with cling wrap. Ideally, take it out and mix it once or twice so everything gets evenly coated with the sauce.
- >> The top end of the daikon is sweeter than the root end which can have a bit of a kick. This makes it better for pickles and for eating raw in salads.



3. Shio-koji Pumpkin Slices

This is ridiculously simple and best of all, tastes great. This is perfect for when you want one more dish or want to add some colour to your meal. Delicious on its own, I imagine it'd be great cut into smaller pieces to be tossed through a salad or pasta dish, too.

- >> Serves 1 as a side dish
- >> Prep time: 5 minutes
- >> Cooking time: 4 minutes

Ingredients

- >> ¼ of a pumpkin quarter
- >> 1 tsp. shio-koji

Method

One Rinse the pumpkin skin and cut the pumpkin in half crosswise. Cut each piece lengthwise into 1cm slices (about 10 slices in total).

Two Lay the pumpkin pieces on a microwaveable plate and spread the shio-koji evenly over them.

Three Cover with a microwave lid or cling wrap and microwave on high for 2 minutes.

Four Turn pieces over and microwave on high for 2 more minutes.

Yuki Matsuri: A Winter Wonderland, Japan Style

Every year thousands of foreign and local tourists alike flock to Sapporo, Hokkaido in early February for the famed Yuki Matsuri and boy are they in for a treat.

Beginning in 1950, the festival has fast become one of Sapporo's main attractions along with its world class ski slopes, the famed Ramen Alley, brilliant seafood and all around fun atmosphere. The festival itself is held over a period of seven days in early February each year, in this case from the 5th to the 11th of February and sees Sapporo's modest 1.25 million population balloon to nearly three times its size over the course of the week and I can assure you they definitely handle the pressure well. Beer halls and izakayas on every corner, hotels popping out of the woodwork, buses and trains leaving from nearly every street and a small army of service professionals there to meet your every need and ensure that you do in fact have the perfect winter holiday.

So what were my experiences? I went along on the A-JET Block 6: Yuki Matsuri/Festival Trip, a five day fun-filled adventure with around 40 other JETs. The event itself was organized by the incredible Ashlie O'Neill, Sandy Cheng, and Jillian Murphy, bless their cotton socks because without them the whole thing would have been a sham. Our midafternoon flight on Saturday the 7th was almost completely booked out and Itami airport was teeming



with people, so like all good gaijin we commandeered the Starbucks before heading through the gate to ANA flight 777 to Sapporo. The flight itself is a small one and a half hours from Itami airport so you certainly don't feel the strain. We collected our baggage and got to enjoy a delightful 45 minute slow roast on the Sapporo Central train and after a brief stop off at the Sapporo House Youth Hostel we were whisked off to the Kirin Beer Hall for a nomi-hodai tabe-hodai extravaganza with the JETs of Block 1 that saw the creation of many new friendships. This was then followed by a bit of bar hopping through Sapporo's entertainment district. We definitely started our trip with a bang.

Sunday saw us all wandering the streets of Sapporo and soaking up the sights. The ice sculptures themselves really are something else, especially the famed Star Wars sculpture in the middle of the festival. What followed was hands down one of the most fabulous meals I have had since coming to Japan, a six course crab lunch at the unbeatable Sapporo Kani-Honke after which we rolled back to our hostel for a well-deserved nap.

On Monday, those of us willing to stand up to the challenge made our way to the slopes of Teine for a day of skiing and snowboarding. If you are interested tickets to the slopes as well as day pass and board/ski hire can



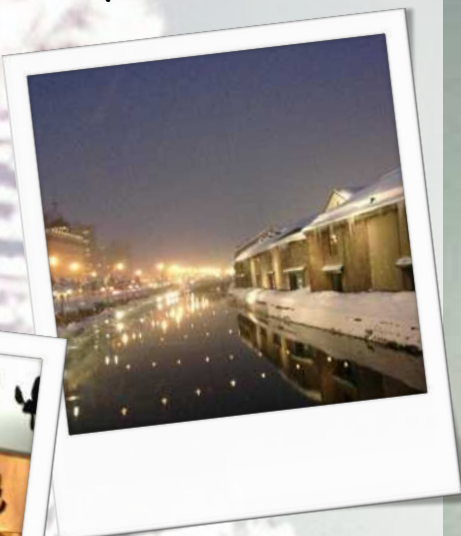
be purchased in Sapporo station for around 6500円 with additional charges for extended time and extra snow gear. Yours truly attempted and failed to snowboard before switching to skis and at least facing forward as nature intended as I fell over instead of sideways. It was a glorious day and there's nothing quite like the bonds you make with people who help dig you out of a snow drift because you

haven't quite figured out how to steer yet. In the evening we found ourselves an izakaya for dinner before cracking out some incredibly tone-deaf renditions of Celine Dion classics at one of the many Big Echo Karaoke bars in the area.

Tuesday we rose for breakfast well-rested and slightly achy after our hard day on the slopes and by breakfast and well-rested I mean lunch because it was already half past eleven. We struck out for the famed Ramen Alley where delicious seafood ramen was consumed. There are a lot of ramen shops in Ramen Alley, surprise! I really couldn't tell you which is the best, so I advise go along yourself and make your own judgments. After, we made our way to the seaside town of Otaru for its famed lantern festival. If you are like me and from Australia you have never really seen proper snow, so seeing actual two meter high snow banks and then jumping in them pretty much made my week. It's a beautiful town full of great places to eat and shop and the ice sculpture lanterns will blow you away, I highly recommend it for the true winter wonderland experience.



On our evening after Otaru we managed to squeeze in a much needed spa trip in Sapporo Station tower. We soaked off the last of the cold and aches and left refreshed for our journey home the next day. Sapporo and its surrounding towns have many onsens and hot springs and I definitely suggest checking one of them out.



Our journey home was subdued because consequently we were all completely knackered after our hard week of fun, but when we all went our different ways at Itami airport I am quite sure that all of us agreed, it really was an excellent adventure.

Rackle Beaman

All photos courtesy of Ashlie O'Neill

Fantastic Four: February Concerts

While everyone else usually hopes to get away from Japan during its coldest month, a number of local and foreign musicians poured into the Kansai area. Although there are always plenty more performances to see than time and funds permit, I was fortunate enough to see four amazing concerts this past February, visiting many venues for the first time.

Crossfaith

Hearing the name Namba Hatch one would expect a venue similar to other Osaka livehouses; low-ceiling, cramped, dark, and unmistakable beer moisture at your feet, but upon entering that same individual will be pleasantly surprised to find that far from being a hatch, this venue is one of Osaka's most spacious. It's at this large venue that Japanese electronic hardcore band Crossfaith played on Friday, Feb 13 during their Madness Tour. That evening Crossfaith was also joined by Boom! Boom! Satellites from Tokyo and Architects from the UK.



The performances were strong and due to the stylistic difference between the bands, there was something everyone could enjoy. Boom! Boom! Satellites appealed fans of alternative rock, leaving the screaming for the following musicians, but like Crossfaith incorporated a number of artificial beats throughout their

songs. Although increasingly common among metalcore bands, it's often annoying if a band uses it without adding anything substantial to the song. Boom! Boom! Satellites demonstrated this perfectly by aligning their electronic beats to their talented female drummer, thereby taking away from the actual percussions. On the other hand, Architects largely avoided EDM additions while lead singer, Sam Carter, thrust the band's fast pace forward with his constant coarse scream (although in a number of songs he does slow down and offer the audience a taste of his soft choir-like vocals). Although energetic and

obviously talented – their previous album, the first with Epitaph Records, Lost Forever // Lost Together garnered much acclaim throughout the metalcore community – there was an enormous sense of awkwardness in regards to their interaction with the crowd. A number of “Wall of Deaths” – where the crowd spreads to opposite sides, then rushes toward one another – were called for and Carter was constantly thanking the crowd and having them clap for random people to avoid the notorious Japanese silence while his bandmates were preparing for the next songs.

However, where the other two bands fell short, Crossfaith, Osaka natives, demonstrated why they were the headliners that evening. They reminded me of a more polished Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,

blending EDM and metalcore flawlessly. Though they sing in English it is clear that it does not stop them from obtaining a huge fan-base. Perhaps it's the J-Pop-esque appearance with the black eyeliner and leather jackets paired with a bare chest that make up for the language

gap. It's also appreciated when the keyboardist/synthesizer (someone I usually consider to be simply a button-pusher) can support the band in other ways. In this case by backing-up frontman Kenta with his own scream. The band's energy had the crowd jumping in unison a number of times and their breakdowns resulted in some of the more chaotic (better) moshpits I've seen in Japan. Also the band dealt with the silence issue in two ways; by simply playing prerecorded ambient sound, which led to a nice buildup for whatever song came next (something their counterparts should take note of), or addressing the audience to express their sincere appreciation. Overall, Crossfaith's



performance showed what a great show can look like when the confidence, brought on by international recognition, is paired with the comfort of playing in one's hometown.

Radical Face

Walking from a “kids gone crazy” kindergarten class and into an esteemed Harvard professor's lecture is the perfect analogy between Radical Face the following day and Crossfaith the

previous night. First, the venue. Set far away from bustling Osaka and moderately bustling Sannomiya, Radical Face, who at times simply goes by his name Ben Cooper, played at the Kobe Guggenheim House. Never heard of it? Neither had I, but what an incredible find. A 7 minute walk from the Shioya JR station, this western-styled house offers a comfortable and intimate night with the performers. The audience of about 40 chose their seats in what could be considered a large living room with an adjoining kitchen serving alcohol and delicious smelling curry. After the show the musicians were also given a meal and allowed to stay the night in the upstairs bedrooms before heading to their next destination the following day.

As for the performances, it's become apparent that concerts in Japan don't necessarily promote opening acts for foreign bands, or other names are lost to the

untrained eye in the kanji-filled concert descriptions. In this case, a small woman – who could have easily been mistaken for a staff member – climbed on stage with her acoustic guitar and thermal bottle of what I assume to be tea and softly addressed the audience before strumming her guitar. Thus began the soft-spoken singing of Rima Kato. At first glance and listen it's easy to think Kato is an awkward musician who sings in English, but hasn't quiet mastered it, using short sentences, dropping an s at the end of words ("the rain change into snow"), or forgetting articles ("I write letter"). However there is no denying that there exists a beauty in Kato's music, tinged by sadness and loneliness and both her manner of singing and acting make her a memorable individual. She accepts the vulnerability of performing and softly releases it in a form that has everyone nodding and swaying as if to respond, "We also know that feeling."

After Kato left the stage as quietly as she had entered, Radical Face (Ben) climbed on stage with his friend and Japan touring partner Josh Lee. While touring Radical Face comes in many shapes and sizes. Sometimes Ben may have a whole band with him, other times it might just be an acoustic performance, but tonight he had his guitar, controlled a foot pedal drum machine, and Josh played the cello. What followed was Radical Face's usual indie-folk with an orchestral flavor. With the majority of his songs being about family, love, and loss, it made for a beautiful, though somewhat depressing Valentine's Day evening. However, his down-to-earth manner and off-



centered humor filled the night with bouts of laughter and he even surprised us by taking a fan's request as one of his last two songs. Truly one of the last musicians I thought I'd ever see live, much less in Japan, the performance and the venue's atmosphere made for an unforgettable night.

New Found Glory

The following week it was back to Umeda for two shows at Club Quattro. The first was a nostalgic gut-punch with New Found Glory wrapping up their 2015 Japan tour. Opening for the pop punk veterans (and sporting NFG t-shirts as well) was Septaluck, a Tokyo-based band also making its way across Japan on its own Diamond Tour 2015. FIN on vocals offered the usual nasally high pitch recognizable in most pop punk bands and was supported by Chu strumming the bass, Junichi Uchino on drums and both Ussy and KAT on guitars. Singing in both Japanese and English, the band was a nice warm-up for the main attraction.

After about five songs, New Found Glory took over and it's hard avoiding the first thought of "Damn, these guys are old," but then when reminded that they were one of your favorite bands in middle school it's understandable. Good thing most of their songs are filled with sing-a-long hooks that allow vocalist Jordan Pundik to catch his breath every once in awhile. That being said, even with some



wear and tear, there is no denying that the band can still keep up with, if not surpass many of their younger counterparts. Some of that may have been due to the energy of a slightly younger drummer Mike Ambrose, formerly of Set Your Goals, filling in for Cyrus Bolooki, who was taking time off for the birth of his baby. NFG also did a great job in keeping the energy high by mixing their setlist with some of their most popular songs like "Sincerely Me" and "All Down Hill" while promoting songs from their newest album Resurrection, which after a few

preliminary listens definitely stays true to their older style. As they thanked fans for their continued support (and gave a shout out to a few who had been to every show in Japan), they left with the promise that they will be a



band forever as long as we the fans wanted it – a reassuring statement especially after popular guitarist and lyricist Steve Klein's departure in 2013.

St. Vincent

Finally to finish this fantastic month filled with musical talent there was recent Grammy-award winning

artist St. Vincent. Even on a moderately sized stage St. Vincent showed why she's worthy to be listed on so many top album lists of 2014 and number one for NPR's Bob Boilen's Top Concert of 2014, as the audience soon realized we weren't simply going to stand and listen to music, but see a performance in every sense of the word. An automated voice asking the audience to please refrain from using cameras and cell phones during the show (a request this author begrudgingly followed) quickly set a digital theme for the night. When St. Vincent entered the stage on what appeared to be a moving walkway, but was actually perfected quick steps, she looked out into the audience with twitchy back and forth movements, a wide-eyed blank stare, and a chilling smile and, along with her bandmates, engaged in unique and quirky choreography during many of the songs. For all intents and purposes she was a flawlessly programmed robot. That is of course, until she opened her mouth to sing and unleashed her fingers on the guitar. Not that these actions weren't also flawless, but they were without a doubt the heartfelt, passionate creations of an individual who has figured out a way to put her diverse spectrum of emotions into beautiful songs. Perhaps the best portrayal of her humanity came when she lay on the crowd during a tremendous guitar solo at the end of "Birth in Reverse," trusting the audience to safely carry her while at the same time allowing them to reach up and play chords to continue the solo. Like all of the shows I've seen in Japan I was left deeply satisfied, but slightly saddened that it had ended so early.

Sean Mulvihill

Dances, DMC, & Didgeridoos: Melaka & Singapore

Malaysia's first center was Melaka, which served as a key port for several groups of people. As with the rest of the country, it was colonized by Europeans and developed a unique mix of architecture as a result. Singapore was also a port town for much of its history. It was ruled by the British for several centuries and control returned to the Brits after Japan's World War II occupation. The city joined briefly with Malaysia before becoming independent in 1965.



Getting There and Around

We took a bus from George Town to Melaka. It took much longer than anticipated, leading to anxiety about reaching our hostel. Melaka has an affordable bus service, though stop names are not announced (we missed ours) and it is not reliable.

The bus between Melaka and Singapore was half the price of our other buses and crossing the border was easy. Singapore has a fabulous and inexpensive train system. Just don't eat or drink anything, or you will be fined.

Our return flights with China Eastern were very cheap, but they still came with a cost. We first had to stop in Wuxi where the customs officers were rude, then had an excruciatingly long layover in Qingdao. They have a McDonald's and an over-priced cafe. Try to avoid long layovers here.

Where to Stay

In Melaka, we stayed at The Cardamom Hostel. The beds are a little uncomfortable and the bathroom situation was less than adequate, especially after one of the two had to be put out of service. Apparently, the resulting filth covering the floor was horrifying. The most concerning thing about the hostel is the padlocked gate with less than a 1:1 ratio of people:keys. This is a clear violation of fire safety. The location is pretty good, with several restaurants/hawker courts nearby, including a vegetarian one basically right outside the locked gate. The

owner was very eager to give us a map with loads of suggestions for things to do and eat.

Blissful Loft in Singapore was one of my worst hostel experiences in all of my travels. Its only merit is it's conveniently located. I don't expect super comfortable beds. The outlets overheating my chargers (that are designed to handle varying voltages) was a little worrying. The owner's constant upgrade offers were a little annoying. The worst part, though, is the lack of quiet hours, combined with the other (highly inconsiderate) people also staying in our room. The lights were left on until well past

midnight and loud phone calls were being made at almost every hour. What infuriates me most about this is that THERE IS A COMMON ROOM! There is absolutely no reason to keep others awake. Most seemed sexist, too, but I digress....

What to Do

The tourist center in Melaka offers a half-day walking tour of the town for free every morning. It's a great way to see the main attractions with some added information. For breakfast, we went to the nearby (and extremely popular) chicken and rice ball restaurant our hostel's owner recommended to us.

We also went to the museum dedicated to Zheng He, a Chinese ambassador in the 15th century who used Melaka as a port during his many expeditions. His story is fascinating and the museum has several interesting

artifacts and stories to share with its visitors.

As is the rest of Malaysia, Melaka is quite diverse. One street houses a mosque, a Buddhist temple, and a Hindu temple (and a delicious coconut ice cream shop). The Hindu population danced several times on New Year's Day and even had a parade. It was colorful, lively, and there was free food provided at its terminus.

For nightlife, there is a street littered with bars. It was overwhelmingly crowded on New Year's Eve so we didn't get to experience much of it, but I imagine most other nights it's navigable. One marker of this street is the restaurant Geographer Cafe, whose fresh juices

are yummy. I also greatly enjoyed just strolling along the river at night. The lights were beautiful and lent it an almost magical atmosphere.

Singapore also has a free guided walking tour Saturdays and Sundays put on by university students. They tell you about Singapore's history first as a colony, then as an independent nation from 1965 onwards. Our guides were friendly and spoke on a personal level with everyone on the trip in addition to their tour spiel.

The Botanical Gardens are beautiful and offer a lot to



be explored. My favorites included the evolution garden, the black swans, and the orchid garden (5S\$ which is more than worthwhile). There is also a restaurant with generously portioned meals (consider splitting if you have a smaller appetite) and where we met two ridiculous dogs complete with their own doggy stroller.

What I loved most about Singapore was simply strolling around Marina Bay. Sights along here include Merlion Park, the Fullerton Hotel, free concerts, the Marina Bay Sands mall and hotel (three towers topped by



a boat; how can you not get a kick out of that?), the Art-Science Museum, and the Helix Bridge, the world's first (only?) double helix DNA-inspired bridge. Both nights we walked down it, there was a man playing a didgeridoo to a synth track, which gave the bridge an even more whimsical flair.

Every night, the hotel plays several light shows. It is magical, and I recommend watching it from multiple locations.

Last Minute Points

>> You could be fined for any number of things in Singapore. They take laws very seriously. Pay attention to signs and what locals do.

Melaka offers so many of the things that make Malaysia charming and can easily be visited with just a day or two. Singapore is one of my favorite places I've been. This August marks its 50th anniversary of becoming an independent nation, which would be an exciting (though perhaps also more expensive) time to visit.

Brittany Teodorski



Five Movies to Watch this Month

By now most of us are well aware of the results for the 2015 Academy Awards. However, unlike the times we are in our home countries for the Oscars and there is ample time to view the films before the ceremony, here in Japan we are left playing catch up since most of the movies have only recently been released. Below are five films you should catch in theaters that were nominated for and won at the Oscars.

Foxcatcher

directed by Bennett Miller (14 Feb 2015)

Are you an only child? If so then you might not be able to relate to what is at the heart of *Foxcatcher*. For the rest of us who struggle to define our sibling relationships (are they rivals, role models, equals?), the story is all too familiar. *Foxcatcher* tells the story of US wrestler and Olympic medalist Mark Schultz, played by Channing Tatum, as he tries to get out from under the shadow of his older brother, fellow Olympic wrestler and coach, Dave by accepting to wrestle under multimillionaire E.I. du Pont, played by an almost unrecognizable Steve Carell. The complicated relationships Schultz develops with du Pont and his brother manifest in a tense build-up throughout the movie and both Carell's and Tatum's decision to depart from their comedic and romantic roles is a breath of fresh air for those who want to see these actors continue to pursue more complex characters.

Nominated for Best Director (Bennett Miller), Original

Screenplay (E. Max Frye and Dan Futterman) Actor (Steve Carell), Supporting Actor (Mark Ruffalo), and Makeup and Hairstyling (Bill Corso and Dennis Liddiard)

The Imitation Game

directed by Morten Tyldum (13 Mar 2015)

The Imitation Game is based on the biography written by Andrew Hodges exploring Alan Turing's life, his work during WWII solving the Enigma code, and his eventual prosecution for homosexual acts – then criminalized in the UK. Fans of *Cumberbatch* will continue to applaud his success following his roles in *Dr. Who*, *Sherlock*, and *Star Trek Into Darkness* and Britain must be happy to see two of its citizens up for Best Actor.

Nominated for Best Picture, Director (Morten Tyldum), Adapted Screenplay (Graham Moore), Actor (Benedict Cumberbatch), Supporting Actress (Keira Knightley), Film Editing (William Goldenberg), Original Score (Alexandre Desplat), and Production Design (Maria Djurkovic - Production Design; Tatiana Macdonald - Set Decoration).

Into the Woods

directed by Rob Marshall (14 March 2015)

Into the Woods finally gets the cinematic release Broadway fans have been waiting for. For those unfamiliar to the play, *Into the Woods* tells the story of a baker and his wife who are left childless due to a family curse put on them by a witch. Promising to end the curse

if the baker and wife find the witch a number of magical items the story blends "Little Red Riding Hood", "Jack and the Beanstalk", "Rapunzel", and "Cinderella." This production will certainly entertain any fan of fairytales, Disney, or musicals and if I were to guess the majority of people fall into at least one of those categories.

Nominated for Best Supporting Actress (Meryl Streep), Costume Design (Colleen Atwood), and Production Design (Dennis Gassner - Production Design; Anna Pinnock - Set Decoration).

The Tale of the Princess Kaguya

directed by Isao Takahata & Yoshiaki Nishimura (23 Nov 2013)

Although it will be tough to beat the enormously popular *Big Hero 6*, the nominations for Best Animated Picture wouldn't be complete without a Studio Ghibli film. *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is that film and one the viewers won't catch in theaters, but can easily rent. The story begins when a bamboo cutter is out in the forest and stumbles upon a tiny girl growing from a bamboo shoot. He takes her home to his wife believing her to be divine and hoping to raise her as their own child. She continues to grow quickly and becomes a beautiful woman. When her father discovers a fortune in the forest in the same manner that he found his daughter he believes this confirms his daughter is divine and worthy of a life as a princess. Beautifully depicting what it means to live life here on Earth with all of its ups and downs, Takahata once

again shows why Studio Ghibli will always be a force in this category.

Nominated for Best Animated Picture.

The Theory of Everything

directed by James Marsh (13 Mar 2015)

An overwhelming amount of stories that movies depict tend to follow a character who overcomes the incredible odds against them. This theme, as old as storytelling itself, was shown a number of times in recent releases including Morten Tyldum's *The Imitation Game*, Ava DuVernay's *Selma*, Angelina Jolie's *Unbroken*, and Jean-Marc Vallée's *Wild*. *The Theory of Everything* is no different. Adapted from the memoir written by Jane Wilde Hawking, the film covers their romantic relationship, Stephen Hawking's pursuit of a PhD on the topic of black holes, and his diagnosis and eventual struggle with motor neuron disease. Many of us JETs may be old enough only to know of Hawking in a wheelchair and with an automated voice, but the movie offers an opportunity to see what made the man the world-renown physicist he is today.

Nominated for Best Picture, Adapted Screenplay (Anthony McCarten), Actor (Eddie Redmayne), Actress (Felicity Jones), and Original Score (Jóhann Jóhannsson).

*Note: Japanese release dates listed

Sean Mulvihill



The Durants

Miss something? This is the 8th installment of The Durants. Catch up on [part 6](#) or start from the [beginning](#) on the Hyogo Times [website](#).

VIII.

"Come this way," Gaia murmured into Drake's ear. "We need to get out of here." The pair slipped away as surreptitiously as they could with their chains. Gaia led them down a maze of alleyways before they stopped near a sewer grate. She had been worried about being seen, but the only people they encountered littered the streets with their dead or dying forms. "Let's get these off, get Brion and Bionca, then get out of here."

"Where, exactly, are we gonna get these off?" Drake whispered shrilly, pulling up the woman's hand by their joined links.

"We're going to my old house...." she trailed off.

"Lead the way. I'm sick o' these diggin' inna my skin."

She nodded and dislodged the grate. They slipped into the labyrinth of tunnels, their labored breath occasionally punctured by the metallic clang of their chains. Some of the passages had been blocked. Shafts of light appeared where debris had punctured through.

"So," Drake started. "This is a lovely walk to your home. Parents liked the stench o' sh-"

"Yeah, they were very mistrustful and paranoid," she interrupted. "They didn't want to give up all the information the Volarchy demands. They even hid my

sister's existence so she wouldn't get sent to the guilds. Food was tight 'cuz of that, but we managed." She came to a stop in front of a seemingly-innocuous stretch of wall. "I'm not sure that anyone's been here since....before my parents were...." Gaia groped clumsily through her chains to find a hidden keypad. The wall quietly melted away after she punched in a flurry of digits and she dragged her companion inside before the wall re-materialized behind them.

"Gaia, this is incredible!" Drake exclaimed. His eyes poured over the dwelling crammed with machines. "We'll be outta these in no time!"

"Use this," a gruff voice replied. Across the floor slid an electric saw.

Reflexively, Gaia picked it up and set it against the man's bonds before processing that there was another voice, coupled with soft sobbing from another room. "Mina? Is that you?"

Her sister stepped into the dim light of the main room. "Hello Gaia. I was hoping you would make your way here."

"How long have you been here? Do you know if Brion and Bionca are still in the keep?"

Mina averted her steely gaze. "Your daughter is here. Your husband is...no longer with us."

She felt as if she had been struck by a boulder and had the wind knocked out of her. Forgetting her chains, she tripped into the other room, dragging Drake along. Bionca was curled into the fetal position. Sobs shook through her.

Her mother crawled toward her, tears clouding her vision. "Bionca...my little queen...I'm here now."

Beside them, Drake hung his head in his hands. Beneath them, the ground began to shiver. Mina clambered up a ladder tucked into the corner and disappeared for the duration of the tremors. They never fully subsided, but once they had weakened, the woman returned. "The air is full of ash. There is no light. This is a good opportunity to leave," she rattled off hollowly.

Wet trails still running down her cheeks, Gaia shook her head. "No, Mina. I won't leave until I've seen my husband laid to rest." Her sister's eyes narrowed before she disappeared into a dark corner.

"Here." Mina threw a crumpled ball of paper at Gaia's feet six days later. She picked it up and read "The funeral of the Volarch's dear son, Brion Taesh, will be held in front of Taesh Keep."

Gaia looked up to her twin, a wry, bitter smile scarring her face. "We won't even be able to see him from the back."

"No, we will not. Do we truly need to..." she reconsidered and sighed heavily. "We cannot stay long. We need to leave while the ash clouds persist. Gather everything now."

Drake and Gaia nodded solemnly and began to pack food and survival essentials. Bionca gingerly picked up the mangled announcement. Her brows furrowed at the unfamiliar name beside her father's. She stuffed it into an inner pocket of her robe then began to help.

Momentarily, they stepped through the false wall. Mina looked back at her niece. "In case you ever need to return here, use this sequence" She punched in a code,

making sure Bionca was paying attention. "Follow me," the woman barked. She turned with a flourish of her robe. Gaia stared wistfully before following. In the back, Bionca scribbled four numbers down.

They reached the service just as the Volarch put a torch to Brion's pyre. For a split second, it seemed a single ray of sun fought through the ash to illuminate the dead man's face.

"My son," the Volarch began, "was a daring ambassador for our great city. I am deeply grieved that fate saw fit to separate us so soon after being reunited. We are not safe from this series of disasters plaguing our lands. The fallen star took my son. The eruptions have clouded our sun. Our crops will fail. Food will be scarce." The gathered mass fidgeted nervously, panic starting to grip them. The guards near the back peered into the crowd apprehensively and one seemed to recognize one or more of the Durants. She held up a small communicator.

"We need to leave now," Mina hissed. The quartet fell back into the shadows of the sewer system as they heard the Volarch promise to acquire food from the surrounding villages. They bolted as fast as they could to the one exit Mina knew would not be guarded.

Halfway there, they crashed into another quartet. Limbs flailed as all parties attempted to regain their bearings. Once they were parted, Bionca found herself face-to-face with Dr. Carlton's killer. "Oh, how fun," he sneered. "The mice found their way out of the trap only to jump in the jaws of the cats. Let's play some more." His palm reached toward Bionca's face.

Brittany Teodorski

Mingalaba, Myanmar!

The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, often known as Burma, has a rich ancient history that is perhaps overshadowed by modern civil wars and military dictatorships. The country only recently opened its borders, so while the tourist infrastructure is lacking compared to other East Asian travel destinations, visitors can experience authentic Burmese culture relatively unspoiled by tourism. My friend and I spent five days in Yangon and Bagan, but longer visits should consider Mandalay and Inle Lake as well.



Getting In & Around

We booked last minute cheap flights with Air China. I have no complaints about the airline other than their inevitable layovers in Beijing: the airport built by people who have never been in an airport. Leave ample time for connections (and then add an hour) - transit passengers must clear customs, go through security, and trek to a far-away gate. Our flight leaving Yangon was late, and despite a three hour layover, we nearly missed our flight from China to Osaka because of lines and unhelpful airport staff. To avoid this, fly via Bangkok.

With planning and good shoes, Yangon is very walkable. We either made loops around our hotel or walked in one direction and took a taxi back. Taxis are cheap, around \$3 to get across the city, but watch out for traffic jams during rush hour. The taxi from the airport will cost \$15 if you book through a hotel or service, but we re-booked the same driver for only \$10 each time.

We hired a driver and horse cart in Bagan - I'd recommend this for the first day, as it is a good way to cover a large area and see the biggest attractions. We hired electric bikes for our second day to explore the lesser known temples on our own. A note of caution: these bikes are fine on the roads, but do not handle sand, loose dirt, or even gravel well - unfortunate, as the paths to the lesser-known temples are not paved. We had a hard time keeping control on these tracks, and I even crashed once.

Based on prior research we booked our domestic flights after arriving in Yangon - it is difficult to impossible to purchase online. We organized flights through our hotel, which was convenient, but I'm pretty sure there was a booking charge either from the hotel or a travel company. Many flight offices were marked on our city map, so budget-conscious travelers could try going to the Yangon office and directly purchasing tickets there.

Where to Stay

The Eastern Hotel, Yangon. Although spartan, it was clean, and included a delicious buffet breakfast with both English and Burmese foods (try the mohinga!). The real attraction for the Eastern Hotel is the helpful staff. The front desk staff were friendly, gave us maps and marked spots of interest, recommended fantastic eateries, and let us store our luggage long past checkout. We would definitely stay here again on a return visit.

Kumudara Hotel, Bagan. Wow. We booked the Junior Suite because there weren't other options, but the unspoilt view of the pagodas from our second-floor balcony was more than worth the extra few dollars. The attached restaurant was great after a long day exploring in the heat, the hotel complex is gorgeous, and the \$4-an-hour massage was perfection.* Both hotels allow booking through their websites, but we booked through **Agoda** for discount rates.



What to Do

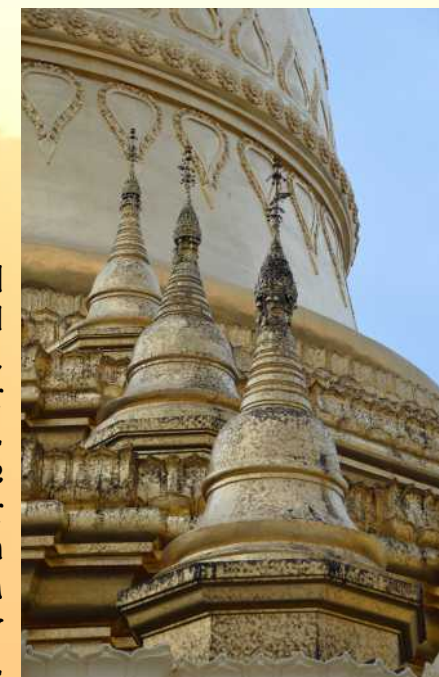
In Yangon we visited the National Museum, the Botahtaung, Sule, and Shwedagon pagodas, Bogyoke market, Aung San Suu Kyi's house (gated and not visible), and spent lots of time wandering. Yangon is a great city to casually explore and get a feel for local life. The ancient pagodas in Bagan are the area's main attraction. Sunset from a pagoda is a must - Shwesandaw is the most popular (for a reason), so arrive very early. Sunrise is also lovely - we chose a smaller temple to avoid the crowds and watch the hot air balloons go up, but the view wasn't as stunning as those seen from the most popular temples. Adults and children are everywhere in and around the temples selling souvenirs. They are very friendly and will talk to you, though this often turns into a sales pitch, tour offer, or outright plea for money. Preferring to explore on our own, we repeated "ruski" or "no hablo ingles" to avoid the more persistent individuals.

Where to Eat

Yangon: Golden City Chetty ('chetty' rhymes with 'city') for Burmese curry at local prices, Green Gallery (our hotel receptionist's favorite) for authentic Thai, the Thiripyitsaya Sky Bistro in the Sakura Tower for lunch and a panoramic view of the city, J'Donuts for snacks and people watching, and, for the adventurous, street food (risky, but so worth it).

Bagan: our guide took us to Sarabha for lunch. It was so delicious that we returned again the next day. We both recommend the vegetable curry.

Fresh fruit juice is ubiquitous, cheap, and absolutely amazing. Some are squeezed juices while others are closer to smoothies. Try classic orange or branch out with watermelon, honey melon, or avocado (blended with ice and topped with a liberal amount of condensed milk).



Other Points

The tap water is not safe to drink. Most hotels provide complimentary and/or cheap bottled water - essential to avoid dehydration. Be careful of any food that may have been prepared with non-bottled water - ice and street food especially. A local advised us to carry our own plates and silverware, as street vendors wash theirs with non-safe water. Be prepared and bring hand sanitizer, indigestion pills, and anti-diarrhoeal medicine.

Travel research told us that we'd exclusively use American dollars. We did for booking flights, hotels, some restaurants, and taxi fares, but most of the non-touristy and/or smaller places preferred - or only accepted - Burmese kyat.

Although some were worried about our safety due to Myanmar's reputation for political unrest, we - two petite white girls - felt completely safe throughout our trip (even when wandering Yangon side streets after dark). Perhaps this is because of the prevalence of



Buddhism in Burmese culture. Monks in red robes are a common sight throughout the country - though many now chat on their cell phones as much as locals.

Also in accordance with Buddhism, the locals dress conservatively. Long skirts and trousers and covering shoulders are a must - don't be *that* tourist. Many of the temples won't allow visitors with inappropriate clothing enter. Myanmar's weather ranges from "hot" to "sweltering" (Yangon is humid while Bagan is arid), so pack accordingly. You can always buy a Burmese **longyi** - worn by both men and women - for under \$10 at a street shop or market stall.

Visitors are technically required to buy an archeological pass to visit the temples in Bagan. Ours was only checked once (at the Shwesandaw Pagoda at sunset), so you could probably avoid funding a corrupt government and get away without purchasing one.

Visitors are also required to remove shoes and socks before entering temples. Choose your shoes carefully. In Bagan, the dust and dirt make socks filthy, so sandals would be better.

Our attempts to speak Burmese were clearly appreciated. Many in the tourist areas speak at least a smattering of English, but our few Burmese phrases went a long way. Try "mingalaba" (hello), "chezu" (please), "chezu ten ba de" (thank you), and "sa lo kan le da" (it's delicious). **



Myanmar is the 30th country I've visited so far, and it was definitely one of my favorites. The phenomenal ancient history, friendly locals and culture, and delicious food combine to make Myanmar an irresistible travel destination that I would love to visit again.

Erika Horwege

*The massage was "Burmese" - felt like deep tissue - a bit painful at times, but excellent for working out any aches and muscle cramps. I felt like putty afterwards. Very blissful putty. Those who prefer the lighter Swedish massage should ask specifically or avoid altogether.

**I'm not sure if this is the correct romanization of Burmese script, but it is the phonetic pronunciation our new Burmese friends taught us.



Osaka Prefecture: All You Want & Then Some

My name's Joseph Baietto. I'm originally from New York City. I'm currently on my second year of JET, eagerly heading into my third. I teach at a junior high school in Shijonawate-shi, on the western edge of Osaka Prefecture, and once a week I teach at one of two elementary schools.

Why did you apply for the JET program or come to teach in Japan?

I majored in Japanese in college and, after studying abroad at Kansai Gaidai for a single semester, knew that I had to come back. The JET program seemed like an excellent first step, and it is, though it's made me very grateful for the three semesters of education classes I took before settling on Japanese as a major!

How did you end up in your prefecture? Was it a preference of yours?

Haha, friends I studied abroad with who are planning to apply for JET always ask me that. I have no idea how I got placed in Osaka, though I'm incredibly glad that I did. I did list it as a preference when I applied, but so did several of my other friends and they were all placed elsewhere (a few ended up in Hyogo though, so not too far!). Maybe it's because I let some Kansai-ben slip during the interview? Who knows!

What has been your favorite memory in your prefecture so far?

They've all been pretty great. I've had very few bad days since coming here, and I think that's thanks in part to the Osaka lifestyle (laid back in all things but business). I suppose I have three:

1. Going back to the bar I was a regular at during my time as an exchange student. That place was like a second home and it's great to go back whenever I want.

2. Any big birthday party for someone in my group of Japanese and foreign friends. They're always rowdy, bilingual, and completely heartfelt.

3. Walking down the streets of Shinsaibashi during a heavy night rain in September or October. The lights were all reflected from the pavement, and the hosts and hostesses and touts and karaoke shrillers were all in full swing. Stepping in and out of the street to dodge passersby while juggling an umbrella and a bag and listening to see if there're any good deals at an izakaya, it was just one of those fun moments of connectedness that you can find in cities.



Is there a "best" time to visit your prefecture?

NOT the summertime. The heat and humidity are absolutely unbearable. With all of the things to see and do, walking around gets exhausting pretty quickly.

Autumn and spring are my favorite seasons here, but for visitors, I would say spring is best, especially early April and sakura season. The weather warms up a little earlier because we're in a basin surrounded by mountains and, even though Osaka's mostly urban,

there are cherry blossoms everywhere. Autumn is great too though, especially if you want some hustle and bustle and human warmth to drive the first chills of winter away.

What are your "Must Do's" for visiting JETs?

There are so many. One thing to mention before I start listing things ad infinitum though: Osaka is a big city, in the middle of a populous urban prefecture, so there's definitely something for everyone. The JET community has incredibly varied interests, and pretty much everyone I know has a hobby, a group of people, or even just a favorite bar that they feel absolutely at home with. With that, here we go:

>> Osaka Station, in Umeda, is probably going to be the point of entry for a lot of people visiting, and what a port it is. It's built between three towering skyscrapers full of shops, so there's a lot to see right off the train. There are a couple of cafes with terraces over the platforms that are a lot of fun (as long as you're not afraid of heights and it's not too chilly). Outside the station, Umeda is full of things to see: malls galore, including Hep5 with its inside, outside Ferris Wheel (I've heard from a couple people, however, that the ride is rumored to be cursed, and that if you ride with a loved one your love is doomed to fail. I've never been able to nail it down, but hey, why take chances?), a veritable avalanche of shops and boutiques (both luxury and regular brands) and lots of places to eat. Grand Front Osaka, a massive new—mall isn't even the word, perhaps palace of capitalism is better—is fun to walk through, as it's slick, modern, and full of things to buy. The basement also has lots of eating options. The Umeda Sky Building is also nearby and a popular stop, with a towering observation deck and open-air escalators.

>> Though I don't go to Umeda often (the prices are a bit too high for me, and the crowds, while fun for people watching, aren't always conducive to serious shopping),

there's some fun stuff that I like to do. First, there's a cooperative farm/garden on the roof of one of the buildings that makes up the station. If you ride the escalators up from the station to the movie theatre on the upper floors, then climb some stairs nearby (they're marked in English and Japanese), you'll find it. Absolutely excellent view, and rarely crowded.



>> Also, I highly recommend going underground! Almost every building in Umeda, and stretching for quite a ways south, is connected by a subterranean labyrinth shopping arcades and pedestrian walkways. Walking these hallways, getting lost, and trying to find my way back is one of my favorite things to do. A fun route is from Osaka Station to Kitashinchi Station (there are tons of signs).

>> Kitashinchi, just south of Umeda, is a fun place to go at night. New bars are always opening and closing, so there's usually something new to try. It can be a bit Japanese-intensive, but don't let that stop you.

>> Nakanoshima is the central government district of Osaka, with the City Bank, City Hall, and lots of assorted offices, company branch offices and headquarters, and financial institutions. Literally translating to "Central Island," Nakanoshima is a thin island with very pretty landscaping and walking paths. The eastern end is taken up by a large rose garden. Historic- and civic-minded people might enjoy admiring the architecture of the various government buildings (especially the Osaka Central Public Hall, constructed in 1911 in sort of a Beaux Arts style). It's one of my favorite buildings in the city, as the exterior and interior are both beautiful, and it often plays host to tango



and salsa dance meets. The Museum of Oriental Ceramics is also located on the island. I like this area a lot, as it's crowded but quiet at the same time, and the towering grids of skyscrapers remind me the most of Midtown Manhattan back home. During sakura season the long parks along the river absolutely explode with blossoms, and are incredibly pleasant to walk along. A Japanese friend told me that, in olden days, Nakanoshima was home to the city's samurai class, which is why, traditionally, it is still a quiet area, despite being a busy government and commercial hub.

>> Shinsaibashi/Amemura are home to the beating heart of Osaka's nightlife, and are where lots of ALTs go for a fun night out on the town. The twin districts (separated by the main thoroughfare of Midosuji, which runs all the way north to Umeda) are also home to Dotonbori Canal, the sprawling Shinsaibashi shotengai, and the famous landmark of Glico Man (recently re-done with more modern lights). Dotonbori, the street running parallel to the canal, is full of restaurants that have giant representations of their food hanging out front (the giant moving crab that Osaka is also famous for is located here. There's also giant sushi, gyoza, cows, blowfish, and more). In addition to the nightlife, the shopping here is pretty good, and the eating is absolutely unbelievable. I spend a lot of time here, as its central location makes it easy for ALTs to congregate. If you're looking to try okonomiyaki and takoyaki, Osaka's specialties, this is the place to do it, as there are tons of street stalls and tiny restaurants. The rest of the world is represented here too: pizza, Spanish tapas, French cuisine, Korean barbeque, and American diner food.

>> Midosuji is the huge thoroughfare that bisects the two districts. Underneath it, the Midosuji subway line runs from Umeda to Tennoji. If you're looking to drop some money on upscale goods, Midosuji is your destination, with flagship branches of Gucci, Versace, Chanel, Louis Vuitton, and more. The Daimaru Department Store is also located here, on the Shinsaibashi side. The building is architecturally beautiful and is well worth a peek inside. Additionally, if you're in the area at 10AM and want to feel pampered, line up outside and wait for them to open the main doors. As you walk in the entire floor staff will bow and say "Good Morning!"



>> Amemura, or 'American Village,' is to the west of Midosuji and is home to a large number of foreign-clothing shops, bars, restaurants, and clubs. It has a slightly more international feel than its twin. You'll find a lot of English-speakers here, both tourists and ex-pats alike. At the center of it is Triangle Park, where skateboarders, rappers, dancers, and all manner of young urban denizens come to hang out. It also has a trash can, a fixture of almost unicorn-like rarity in Japan unless you're near a convenience store. On Halloween the place is jam-packed with people in costume.

>> Shinsaibashi, the Japanese twin of Amemura, is to the east. The concentration of bars and restaurants here is far higher, as they are piled one on top of each other in multistory buildings. There's also a large concentration of clubs in this area. I tend to use more Japanese in Shinsaibashi than I do in Amemura. Watch out for hosts and hostesses trying to lure you to their establishments.

>> North of Shinsaibashi, towards Nakanoshima, is Honamichi. If you're in the market for cheap kimono or yukata, this is where you want to go.

>> Namba is just south of Amemura and Shinsaibashi. There are multiple shotengai, and it can be considered an extension of the shopping and eating culture of its northern neighbors. There's also Namba Parks, a large mall complex with impeccably landscaped gardens on the roof. To the east of Namba you'll find Nipponbashi and Den-Den Town, a district full of computer-supply stores, used-electronics wholesalers, manga cafes, hobby shops, arcades, and a large concentration of Osaka's maid cafes.

>> Tennoji/Shinsekai can be found if you walk a long way south from Den-Den Town (faster to take the train). Tennoji is the name of the broader district, home to Shi-Tennoji Temple, the Tennoji Zoo, and Abeno Harukas, the tallest building in Japan. Shinsekai is a district within Tennoji. It's been an entertainment area for more than 100 years, and is the location of Tsutenkaku Tower, an old, faded monument of Osaka's glory.

More deliciously, it's the place where you can get the best kushikatsu, or fried things on sticks. Restaurants in Shinsekai will deep-fry anything, and do it cheaply. If you feel like gorging, Shinsekai is a good place to go. During Oktoberfest season there's a big one in Tennoji Park

>> A word of caution—Shinsekai is considered by many natives of Osaka to be the most dangerous part of the city, due to its high concentration of pachinko parlors, arcades, standing bars, and, most importantly, adult entertainment establishments. This is, of course, dangerous by Japan standards, but still, keep your wits about you. To put it in perspective, I go down to Shinsekai to keep my 'urban awareness' skills, necessary for life in New York, up to snuff. You're not going to be mugged or assaulted, but you can't move with the careless, happy-go-lucky attitude that a lot of tourists in Japan have. Still, it's a great place to visit, and, for a place named "The New World," it's a bit of a sad and dusty monument to the last couple years of the Bubble Era.



>> Kyobashi/Osaka Castle. One of Osaka's most famous sights is its eponymous castle, constructed by Toyotomi Hideyoshi during his quest to unite the country under his rule at the end of the Warring States Period. It's an imposing sight that sits at the center of Osaka Castle Park, a sprawling pentagon of greenery with gardens, ponds, the moats and battlements of the castle itself, and even a small forest. There are also sports fields and a few concert venues, as well as a huge number of ume and sakura trees and plenty of places to picnic during hanami season. The castle was bombed during the Pacific War, so the current castle is a concrete reconstruction that houses a large

museum. Honestly, even as a major history buff I can take or leave the museum portion. The interior makes no concession to authentic design, there is very little translation in some of the exhibits, and the amount of historical artifacts was low, in my opinion (though there was a copy of the famous 'Order Disarming the Peasantry' that banned peasants from carrying swords. That was incredibly cool to see). The exterior of the castle and the surrounding park, however, are absolutely fantastic and I highly recommend them. There are several shrines on the castle grounds, and the massively imposing castle walls must be seen to be believed. You can walk the battlements and admire the city from multiple angles, as well, and the white-and-green castle looming over you as you walk slowly towards it creates a delightfully foreboding atmosphere. Additionally, there's a large gift shop near the castle that lets people stock up on omiyage, or, if they so prefer, buy a couple of swords and duel around the grounds (yes, swords are available for purchase, both plastic and metal ones). Kyobashi, the district the castle is in (Kyobashi Station is one of the major transit hubs, and a main access point for the castle) is another fun area to wander around. According to another Japanese friend, during the war, Kyobashi was one of the few areas of the city that escaped immolation during the bombings, and so it became the location of the city's black market. Because of this, Kyobashi still has some grit amongst the glamour, with lots of yakiniku restaurants, pachinko parlours, and adult entertainment venues. It's a fun place to wander around at night, noisy and brightly lit. There are also upper-class eateries and malls in the area, including an interesting 'sunken mall' called Comms Gardens that is set below street level.

That about covers it for all of the really famous areas that I know. Below is a short list of individual sights that are worth it.

>> Osaka Aquarium Kaiyukan: the single best aquarium that I've ever been to. Chicago's Shedd Aquarium comes close, but Osaka's whale sharks carry the day.

>> Minoh Park: located in the north of the prefecture, it's part of a chain of national parks that stretches all the way to Tokyo. In the autumn it's one of the major centers

for kuyou, foliage viewing. It's beautiful year round, however, with a winding trail that follows a river gorge until it reaches a large waterfall, the water from which is used to make the delicious Minoh Craft Beers (I recommend the Wizen and the Stout, both of which can be purchased at shops along the trail).



>> The National Museum of Art, Osaka: home to a large permanent collection, the museum also does temporary shows. It's located on Nakanoshima, and is almost completely underground. Well worth a visit (the temporary show I went to last summer, Nostalgia and Fantasy, was out of this world).

>> Tenma, between Kyobashi and Osaka Station on the JR Loop Line, has a sprawling restaurant district, full of small and open-air eateries. The Minoh Brewery runs a beer bar here called Beer Belly, and there's excellent Spanish and Mexican food to be found as well. It's a lot of fun to just jump in and get a little lost.

If I may write just a little more about seeing the city: for glitz and glam, go to Umeda, Shinsaibashi, and Tennoji. If you want gritty urbanism or old, more traditionally Japanese sights, head to Amemura, Kyobashi, Shinsekai, or Shinsaibashi at night. Also, it's my opinion that the whole city looks better at night, and even more so during or after a heavy rain. That's just me though.

What do you feel is unique to your prefecture, something JETs can't find anywhere else?

Osaka has big-city cred, but the people here are possessed (for the most part) of a more laid-back attitude than in other parts of the country. They're a little friendlier than in other parts of the country, much more willing to start a conversation with you at a bar, or restaurant, or sometimes on the train or street. They're

great fun to talk to, especially members of the older generation you'll find running small shops.

Also, the food here is amazing. Skip the fast food, skip the big Japanese chains, and skip whatever hip new place the Japanese talk and travel shows are recommending. Find a food stall, or duck into a hole-in-the-wall place. There's absolutely unbelievable food everywhere in Osaka.

Finally, and at least for me, I miss the grit and tough guy attitude of New York City. Osaka has that, or a 'lite' version of it, in some places, and it's really refreshing to walk around a big city with a little bit of litter and graffiti. Again, maybe that's just me.

Anything else you want to add?

Yes: as I touched on above, skip the fast food, skip the chains, and find somewhere small, out of the way, and independent. Same rules apply if you're going to go out drinking: skip the foreign-friendly bars and go somewhere Japanese-run and frequented by Japanese people. The service is usually better, there are bars with a kaleidoscope of different themes and specialties, and if you hit it off with another customer or regular they might even buy you a drink! Shinsaibashi and Namba are great places for finding bars like this.

Joe Baietto

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2. Shinsekai Kushikatsu - Scott Patterson
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5. Sky Building - Joe Baietto
6. Shinsekai - Scott Patterson
7. Aquarium - Joe Baietto

calendar

march

Outside Hyogo

Awaji

Hanshin

Kobe

AJET Events

Tajima

Tamba

Harima

monday	tuesday	wednesday	thursday	friday	saturday	sunday
2	3	4	5	6	7	8 WhyNot? Ski Trip (Nagano)
9	10	11	12	13	14	15 Ako Antique Market HAJET Takarazuka Revue
16	17	18	19	20	21	22 Awaji Flower Exhibition
23	24	25	26	27 Himeji Castle Re-Opens	28 Punk Spring Minatogawa Craft Market	29
Awaji Flower Exhibition						
30	31	all month		Masterpieces from the Kunsthaus Zürich		
				Special exhibition of Hina Ningyo Dolls		
				Ferdinand Hodler Exhibition: Towards Rhythmic Images		

