

# Do You Really Understand Japan?

Before coming to Japan through the JET Programme I studied Japanese language, linguistics, history, and literature in college as part of my minor in Japanese studies. In addition, I spent two months living in Osaka, taking day trips to various famous sights around Kansai, and even spending the New Years Holiday in Kyoto. After all of that I thought I understood Japan pretty well. I thought that the JET Programme would make good use of my studies, and that I would be well prepared to live anywhere in the country. I applied, interviewed, and after a brief stint as an alternate, was given a position.

I was told I would be going to Ugo town in the south of Akita prefecture. I remained confident that I would be just fine, after all I had spent some time studying about and living in this country. Once off the plane, my supervisor helped me shove my stuff in the BOE's car, and we started back to Ugo. It was then that my plans started unraveling. The entire ride back was an epic struggle to understand his Japanese. I had never heard anything like it. The place names along the road used either kanji I had never seen, or used bizarre spellings that I would never have imagined. Even the part of Ugo I live in has a kanji spelling that didn't seem to match up with the phonetics I had learned.

My first year in Japan as an ALT was spent in my tiny, but charming rice farming town, learning to know the "Real Japan" as countless CLAIR officials and former JETs had told me I would. The one I thought I knew

but, now very obviously, did not. There were no hotels, no big restaurants, no concerts, no stores open after 7pm, and absolutely no young people. The only things there were in abundance were rice fields, crows, Japanese cedar, snow, and, oddly enough, barber shops. I learned about the history of my town. I learned about its festivals and traditions. I even learned the local dialect as best I could. For one entire year I rarely ever ventured out of Southern Akita, and I only left the prefecture once. Don't get me wrong here. I love Akita. In fact Akita, Ugo in particular, has become like a second home to me. However, I kept getting this feeling that, surely this couldn't be it. I couldn't be as naive as to think that the "Real Japan" could consist of just one small area of Akita prefecture. I knew that I was wrong about Japan, but I wanted to know just how wrong.

I started small, with a trip to Sendai. Then I went on a self-guided mini tour of Iwate with some friends. We hit Morioka, Hiraizumi, Ichinoseki, Yuda, and Okunakayama Kougen (whose station had a yorkshire terrier as its station master.) Next we tackled Aomori. We went to Hachinohe, (where I encountered a decent Nicholas Cage look-a-like.) Lake Towada, Takko (the garlic capital of Japan), and most notably Shingo (where Jesus is allegedly buried). During subsequent holidays, my trips became more and more elaborate. One rather ambitious golden week holiday saw me on an eight day trip down the Japan sea coast with 3 other ALTs. We drove through Yamagata, Niigata, Toyama, Ishikawa, Fukui, Shiga, and Gifu, getting to know each prefecture as best as we could.

## A Hot Day in August

Interesting and diverse, a kaleidoscope of different peoples. Strange and foreign lands unfathomable to my limited experience. But the more I learn, the closer I come to understanding what makes people tick. Japan and America are interesting countries, lands shrouded in mystery.

Up until my third year on the JET Programme, I was so focused on Japan that I really didn't see much of anything else. I studied the language and the culture. I traveled all over the country. I tried my hand at making mochi, tea ceremony classes, and even joined a Japanese choir. Through a seemingly benign decision to learn some Japanese songs, I ended up learning about more than just Japan.

Singing is something that I love to do. I have a tendency not to let go of the microphone in karaoke, and I listen to Japanese music nearly all the time at home. But the types of songs I hear at school, the songs that almost all Japanese people know, escape me. I heard about a "Let's Chorus" singing group that was run once a week at my local youth centre and signed up without hesitation. The teacher and the other members of the class welcomed me with open arms, and about five months in, she told us about an event in August we could participate in if we wished. A piano was going to be brought up from Nagasaki-- a piano with a history dating back to the release of the atomic bomb.

First, there was "Believe," a relatively modern song with a

lighthearted melody, and lyrics which speak of the future. "Furusato," a traditional Japanese song that speaks of home, and "The Vanishing August," a haunting melody about the harrowing effects of the atomic bomb. I approached learning the songs the way I usually do - from the heart. But this time, my heart didn't really know what to make of these songs. I had always thought that the events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were important events in history, but I didn't have any strong feelings towards them as an Australian.

Or so I thought. I happened to book a holiday to Okinawa with an American friend before the month of the recital. We arrived at the main island, and one of the places my friend was adamant about visiting was a place called "Himeyuri no tou," a place that I was not familiar with. A little background: 222 female students and 18 teachers were formed into a nursing unit during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945. The Himeyuri students were on the battlefield, performing surgery, nursing and other duties for most of the terrifying three month long battle. Near the end, many were living in dark caves filled with countless injured and dead soldiers, and many others were dead.

I was deeply shocked by the accounts and testimonies of war from the Himeyuri students. My American friend was on hand to explain the things that I did not understand, and before we left I felt what it might have felt like for the young girls to go to war, and the American soldiers

## Patrick Costello

The most profound moment on this trip came quite unexpectedly in Northern Fukui. It had gotten dark and we had gotten lost searching for a place to camp reasonably close to the famous Tojinbo suicide cliffs. We wandered into a small coastal town called Mikuni. All of the camping sites were closed and we were exhausted. So we parked at the aptly named "Mikuni Friendship Beach" and decided to grab some food in a local cafe and figure things out. After finishing our food, we prepared to leave and asked the owner of the cafe if he knew anywhere that we could camp for the night. He told us we could camp on the beach for free, and invited us to come back whenever we liked. We decided after setting up the tent to go back to the cafe and have a few beers, after all, they seemed like nice enough people.

As it turns out the cafe's owner used to tend bar in Australia and had lived in a numerous other Southeast Asian countries, and therefore loved talking with foreigners. We were even more surprised to hear that this town was a popular place for surfing. As the night went on it was revealed not only that everyone who was in the bar that night surfed, but that in this town you can only do winter night surfing. That's right, surfing at night, in February, often in the snow. The locals were all quite surprised that we had come all the way from Akita. They were interested both to hear what life was like there, and in hearing some Akita-ben. After a wonderful night of cold beer and warm conversation, we ended up leaving with phone numbers, email addresses, maps, recommendations for travel and food,

an invitation to their yearly reggae festival, and an original drawing by a local fisherman/artist, who happened to be there trying to get a few hours respite from the ire of his pregnant wife.

My most recent trek took me skydiving in the country-side of Tochigi, and crawling around in a limestone cave in the secluded mountain villages of Fukushima. In addition to that, I stumbled upon an Ayu (sweetfish) festival in Shirataka. A town in Yamagata that still uses a huge bridge-like trap, called a yana, to catch the highly prized fish on the Mogami river. Every new place I visit leads to new understanding of a country I thought I understood.

If I were to take the self-assessment my teachers often assign my students, I would have to say that I didn't have any better an understanding of Japan than some of my students do of my country. I didn't come to Japan thinking I would be learning much, but as ministers of cultural exchange, I now realize that the nebulous quest of grassroots internationalization we are sent here to spearhead is a door that must swing both ways. Learning is as essential as teaching, and if you're doing it right someone might push you out of a helicopter, give you a bunch of apples, have their wife cook you a steak, or even better things I haven't discovered yet.

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## Joshua Brown

to fighting them. My chest grew tight, and I could feel tears welling in my eyes. This... sorrow, this sense of helplessness...Is that what they felt? I had so many questions, yet one thing was clear. I wanted to remember these feelings, and put them into my performance.

The day of the recital came around, which was not just a recital, I soon learned. The first half of the concert was information about the piano, and a reading about the times of the bombings. The piano had been only about 1.5 kilometers from the epicentre of the blast, and while not surviving completely intact, had been restored. We took to the stage. It was not indicated in the concert programme that I was Australian; only my name and face were included. I felt like all eyes were on me as I stood on the stage, and it didn't seem like the looks I was getting were the good kind. We sang. First, "Believe," then "Furusato." Then finally, the most moving piece, "The Vanishing August."

*In a blaze of heat, you became a painting on the wall...*

*Hit by the light, I melted into the wall...*

*A black rain falls on our home.*

I fought back tears as the weight of the song, the mellow sound of the special piano, and our voices merged to create something more than just a song. As I looked out into the audience, I saw people who had lost the fight, their cheeks stained with wet memories.

I believe that just as a person is the sum of his or her experiences, so is a country. Thinking about the events in the past of one country can give you so much insight into how the people of that country think, and feel. To that end, reflecting on the past of two countries can tell so much more about the attitudes and values that each holds dear. I had not given much thought about the past of my own country, let alone another. But slowly and through many questions, I have begun to contemplate countries outside my own, and have begun to feel more than indifference in regards to things that I used to feel did not concern me. I feel enriched through my experience with the piano from the times of the bombing.

I never thought that I would learn so much about two intertwining countries while on the JET Programme. Surprisingly, it was through interactions with people and experiences not involving my own country. The JET Programme is great in that it brings Japanese people together with 'foreigners,' while also bringing people of different nationalities together in an invaluable exchange of cultures in ways I had neither expected nor anticipated. I am starting to take more notice of the people around me now, and the valuable information they have to impart. Slowly, I am beginning to appreciate the interactions between cultures, and not just focus on Japanese culture, all thanks to the experiences leading up to a hot day in August.

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