

Celebrating the School Year's End by Declaring War



Photo credit: desta

By Karl Hoeschen

I thought in my second year I wouldn't encounter any *serious* surprises at school. The environment most conducive to chaotic genkiness being my elementary schools, I worked very hard to establish my presence there and the expectations I have for my students. Having achieved some modest consistency and results, I started to write off my remaining time here as smooth sailing...But then I had one of those moments, just like I was new all over again and having no idea what to do. Let me briefly shaharizhad to a when I was new so you can fully understand what was going through my mind when this happened:

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Less than a month off the plane some Saitama Jets gathered for fireworks in Omiya. I met a then 5th-year Saitama Jet along the way, Mr. Ryan Jude. We talked of other upcoming Saitama events while we walked. Suddenly, Ryan sharply corrected me and looked around the train station to see if anyone was staring at us, for I had accidentally misspoken and committed a *DAME* very loudly in public. He explained that the small, artfully groomed plants are called *bonsai* trees, and not “banzai” trees. (*Oh, ‘fer my Karate Kid edjyumakay-shon!*) Ryan was very kind and informed me that some older Japanese people may have a problem with *banzai* because of its use during World War II. This moment made an impression on me and I vowed never to say (that word) again...At least until I learned more about acceptable uses of (it) in Japan, which of course I never did.



So what does my elementary principal do on this seemingly normal day? As I constantly assess my assimilation into the Japanese workplace by how smooth the day progresses? He first remarks on how difficult the second graders have been, and that this was my last lesson with them this school year. He also thanked me for continuing to work with them and explained he wanted to do something special at the end of their class. His idea: To enter during the usual *benkyo wo owari ni shimasu* classroom ritual and three times raise his arms and yell “BANZAI!!!” exactly as the soldiers do before they grenade themselves in Clint Eastwood’s *Letters from Iwo Jima*.

You may imagine how I felt about this.

Turns out, having later spoken with some other teachers, that “banzai” has more linguistic applications than ritualized suicide. You can say “banzai” and raise your arms one time to say you give up or to lament your sports team’s recent, shocking failure. Three times shouting and raising your arms encourages your team to fight harder, and can also mean congrats for a job well done. But I didn’t know any of this then. The celebratory energy was lost to my obvious awkwardness.



The bright side? My elementary *kocho-sensei* misread my schedule and that actually was not my last lesson with those students. So I got to try again. But if that class hasn’t shaped up by April 2013, you may get to see this article again, but with the ending more like what I first imagined.



Photo credit: Fellowship of the Rich



What is the Purpose of an ALT?

by Stephen Welch

My guess is if you asked this question to 20 different people, you would get 20 different answers. And it's probably a question that we have all asked ourselves: What *is* our purpose? I recently thought about this question as I reflected on my own classes and work. It was the end of my first full year with OC students, and I noticed that some students were still struggling with forming very basic sentences in English. I couldn't help but feel a bit downtrodden. I imagine most other ALTs feel this way from time to time, especially those who may work at lower-performing schools or schools where the students seem to be uninterested in learning English. I've also read news articles that pointed to the JET Program and the lack of English fluency in the population as a sign of its failure. But after these observations, I have come to a different conclusion.

If you go to the JET Program website and look under the Introduction section, the first line says "The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, now in its 25th year, is aimed at promoting grass-roots international exchange between Japan and other nations." The E in JET doesn't stand for English, it stands for Exchange. If the goal of the JET Program is to make everyone fluent in English, it's a lofty, worthy goal, but not a realistic one. Of course it would be silly for me to deny that the reason we were chosen for the JET Program, or the reason that ALTs exist at all, isn't in some part due to our English ability. We *do* provide opportunities for students to practice their English and we *do* serve as a teaching resource for other English teachers. (Now of course, how they choose to use us is at their discretion, and that is a very interesting and important discussion, but I don't plan to discuss that here).



If English fluency isn't our goal, then what is our goal, what is our purpose? You have to remember that Japan is an island, and not only that, for much of its recent history, even up until now, a very closed-off nation. As an American coming from a country where I have met people with all kinds of different clothes, accents, skin colors, and languages, even I have trouble at times understanding people from different cultures. But in a country like Japan, it's very rare to find someone with different clothes speaking a different language. It's even rarer to find someone who looks different from you or who has a different cultural viewpoint. And this is where the exchange part of the JET Program comes into play. That is our purpose, to be different.



In this day and age, the world becoming a smaller place means that we find ourselves interacting with others who not only look different, but who also speak a different language. These interactions will only become more common, and English has emerged as a way to communicate across these different cultures. But speaking the same language as someone doesn't automatically entail understanding. Being aware of how others' cultures and beliefs are different is just as important as speaking their language. Exposing Japanese students to people who embody these differences provides them with an important piece of knowledge: Japanese culture is a culture, not *the* culture.



Japanese students may not be interested in learning English because they think they will never use it in their daily lives. And that's a fair assumption or belief; after they graduate they may work a job that uses no English whatsoever. But one day they may be a clerk at a hotel or restaurant where they have to interact with someone from a different culture, or they may grow up to be an official creating the laws which determine Japan's interactions with other countries. Maybe they will have a colleague who asks, Why does this person act this way? Why do they look this way? Don't they understand that you don't say this or act this way in Japan? And hopefully, if we have done our job as ALTs, they will be able to explain that we are one of many different cultures. Hopefully they will be able to explain that not everyone knows about the *wa*, not everyone knows how to "read the air," not everyone knows the Japanese procedure for business card exchanging because they are coming to the situation with their own set of beliefs, history, customs, and culture.



If through our interactions, through our exchange as ALT to student, ALT to teacher, ALT to Japanese neighbors and friends, if they learn to understand this important idea, then we will have done our job. Our success will not be measured on an English test, but as a common knowledge shared by those who have known us.



Train Travel

by Raina Ong

There's something romantic about train travel. I'm no train otaku, but Japan has opened my eyes to the different kinds of trains: express, local, super duper fast, rapid, doesn't stop at my stop, that fast one, overnight trains, discounted trains, trains to look out of the window, to sit and watch this life so full of cares rush by.

You know you're living in Japan when you know what time your last train from Tokyo leaves. You get annoyed on the way back because the last train is always so frakking crowded. You stand next to a salaryman who smells like alcohol, or perhaps you get the double combo of both alcohol and cigarettes. It's okay, you're on your way home. Then you get a seat and perhaps sleep on someone's shoulder, maybe drool a little. But it's cool, this is Japan and trains are an extension of your bed (except you sleep all dressed up).



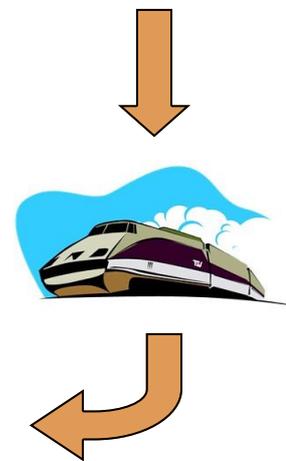
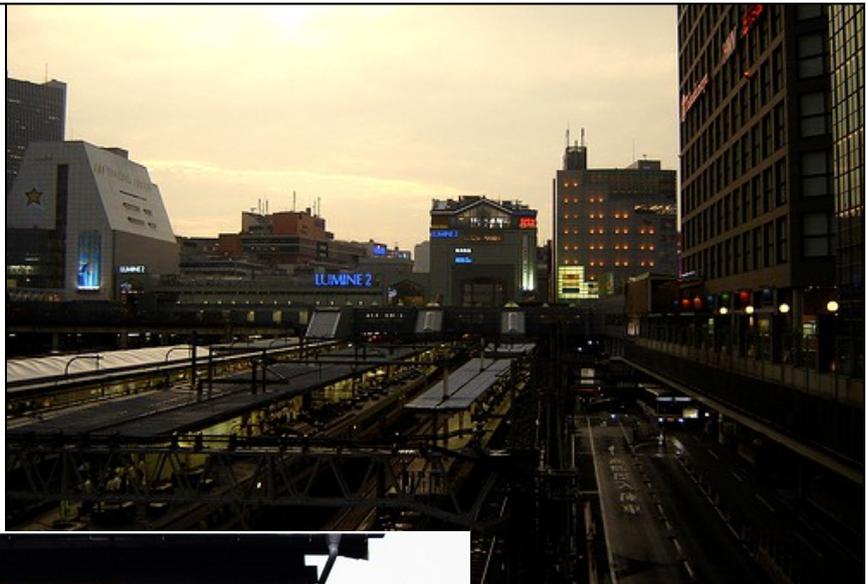
Ochanomizu on a Cloudy Day. Photo credit: motoshi ohmori

Then you wake up. Did you miss your stop? Or did you wake up at the right time? Or did you wake up six hours later in a different prefecture? If this last case is what you find yourself in, then congratulations, you might have caught the overnight train from Omiya to Kanazawa! Night trains—not the expensive sleeper trains—are an awesome way to travel for cheap too. It looks and feels like you're going in a loop for six hours, then day breaks and BAM! you arrive somewhere quite foreign. Train time travel indeed (hurray for alliteration!).

Then there's the great Seishun-18 Kippu for everyone young at heart and with a butt of steel (just kidding). ¥2300 for all you can ride for 24 hours? WHAT IS THIS CRAZY DEAL?! Go with friends and make it a railtrip. Go alone and make friends on the train. Bring a book¹. Bring some music. Most of all, bring a travelling drink with you.

1. If you can read Japanese, there's a magazine devoted to travelling on the Seishun-18 Kippu with information for recommended itineraries, which trains to take, and other sundry topics.

Shinjuku station (top) and a distant inaka location (bottom). For merely the price of a train ticket you too can experience this Before & After. Photo credit: Troy Mclure (top), knrty (bottom)



Then there's the shinkansen (bullet) train (please, no jokes about whether the shinkansen is a guy or girl). While they may cost more than a domestic flight, how could you not want to take a train that travels superfast, has magnetic brakes, 'floats' a few millimetres above the tracks and takes you from city centre to city centre? You can even turn your seats so you get a little booth with your friends to drink, play cards, and chat. The best part is, while you pay full price buying your ticket at the JR station, there's usually a discount ticket shop² near most stations that are even somewhat big. Why pay full price when you can get your tickets there? If you don't know where there could be one, ask the station staff and they'll direct you to one, you cheapskate.

If you can conquer Tokyo's (and the greater Tokyo area) rail network, you are ready to conquer the world. You too, can be the world's greatest Pokemon trainer.

Disclaimer: This is a non-paid article extolling the virtues of train travel. You can find the author reading her train schedule book, at the end of the platform with her camera, or sometimes waxing lyrical about baking soda.

2. These ticket shops, called *kinken* (金券), sell all sorts tickets, not just for shinkansen but also local trains, buses, and planes, even gift vouchers or tickets for amusement parks. Some of these discount tickets cannot be used during busy seasons like Golden Week, so be sure to ask or confirm before making your purchase!

JETting Behind the Scenes

by Eden Aquino

Editor's note: For many people, the words "JET Programme participant" bring to mind the image of an English ALT, but high in the towers of the Saitama kencho is a Jet whose mission and job description remain shrouded in mystery. In this issue of the MemoRandom, we'll take a closer look at this enigmatic figure and see one of the many ways Jets work to promote international understanding.

Hello everybody! This is Eden, the CIR who works in the Compulsory Education Management Division at the Saitama Prefectural Office. Since about 95% of the JET Programme participants in Saitama are ALTs, I decided to introduce a little bit about my job as a Brazilian CIR.

We Brazilian CIRs come to Japan in April (so I have now become a 2nd year CIR!). There are a total of 15 Brazilian CIRs across Japan, and each of our jobs are different. In my case, my job basically involves support related to Brazilian children in Japan: translation, interpretation, school and home visits, and newsletter writing. But it doesn't mean that they won't ask me to do presentations about Brazil, or even give Japanese or Portuguese classes!

By support for Brazilian children here in Saitama, this means for example helping Brazilian students who were born in Brazil and came to Japan when they were little. In most cases, these children are not able to speak, understand, write, or read Japanese—in other words, even though they are in the classroom, they don't know what's going on around them. They can't understand what's been said, what they have to do for homework, or even make friends or express their feelings in a completely different language.

Brazil and Japan have a relationship over 100 years old, so the Brazilian families here are *nikkei* (of Japanese descent), and they usually come to Japan to look for a job. Almost always they work in a factory, which means that they have to spend most of the day working hard, not even having time to see their child.

Let's suppose that, due to the parents' circumstances, the child who was starting to learn Portuguese when the family was in Brazil suddenly has to travel to the other side of the world and be part of a completely different environment, surrounded by people who speak an unknown language. What situations will the family face from now on?

Most of the time, parents don't have the time (or knowledge) to deal with the child's situations at school. They can't help with homework or even read the letters sent from school. That's where I help. My job is to translate lots of documents from schools such as report

cards, notifications about parents meetings, school events, teachers' written comments about the student, and everything else that relates to the foreign family and their child. Also, during the meeting with the teacher, parent, and child, I have to be the bridge between the Brazilian family and the school, interpreting everything about the child's situation inside and outside of school.

It is not only a matter of translating and interpreting things from one language to another. We usually have to discuss delicate matters that the child deals with at school, such as the child not being able to follow the classes, not having any friends, hiding their homework, or throwing away the report card and letters sent from school (previously translated by me). Sometimes it's a problem where the child is involved in a bullying situation, a bad circle of friends, is skipping classes or school, smoking, or shoplifting.

During those meetings, I have to keep my own composure and not show any emotion when I see the parents crying as they talk about these situations. It is really hard when I have to interpret, for example, that they haven't paid any school fees yet (for meals, materials, and trips), or when they just ask me: "Eden, what should we do? Do you think we should do this or that?" I must confess I get speechless sometimes. Thankfully with an advisor from my office and together with teachers, principals, and parents, we can solve the problems.

Even with situations like these, I am really proud to be one of the 15 Brazilian CIRs here in Japan, and I have no words to describe the heartfelt "Thank you" I receive from parents and teachers during school and home visits around Saitama. Each of us on the JET Programme has a unique job, and I hope we can keep doing them so that we can bring happiness to all Japanese and foreign people here. So don't give up! Don't forget we all have a mission here: to become a bridge between Japan and our home countries— *Minna, ganbarou!!*



Recipe Corner

With Golden Week behind us and summer holidays ahead of us, Jets' wallets might be feeling the strain of the travel season. Hence, this edition of the recipe corner features some budget-friendly dishes.

Spicy Bean Sprouts

The TBS *Tokumaru* morning show occasionally has handy economy-themed recipes, and this one dresses up the otherwise drab bean sprout (*moyashi*, もやし) in tasty, tasty spices.

- 1 bag bean sprouts
- 1/2 Tbsp each white, black sesame
- 2 tsp. *ichimi* spice*
- 4 Tbsp soy sauce
- 2 Tbsp *men-tsuyu* broth
- 1 Tbsp vegetable oil
- 3 Tbsp sesame oil
- 1 Tbsp *kochujan* paste*
- 1 Tbsp grated garlic

- 1) Mix sesame with *ichimi* spice, then stir in the liquid ingredients. Finally, mix in *kochujan* and garlic. Mix well.
- 2) Blanch bean sprouts by immersing 10 seconds in boiling water, then immersing in ice water 1-2 minutes. Drain thoroughly.
- 3) Mix with sauce and serve.

*Left: *Ichimi Tōgarashi* spice, i.e. red chili pepper. Note that it is different from *shichimi* spice (七味). Right: *Kochujan* (Korean: *kochujang*) is a spicy miso paste usually sold in the same area of grocery stores as Chinese and other Asian continent ingredients.



Bean Sprout Burgers

If the main course is what your looking for, *Tokumaru* has a recipe for that, too (yield: 8).

- 1 bag bean sprouts
- 4 Tbsp each milk, bread flakes (*panko*)
- 300g ground meat
- salt, pepper to taste
- 4 Tbsp each soy sauce, *chūno sōsu* (semi-thick Worcestershire sauce)

- 1) Soak bread flakes in milk, and chop bean sprouts into 1.5cm/1 inch chunks.
- 2) Mix the above with ground meat, salt, and pepper until meat mixture becomes smooth and sticky. Form into 8 patties.
- 3) In an oiled frying pan on medium heat, brown both sides of patties. Add 50 cc of water, cover, and cook until meat is done.
- 4) Add soy sauce and Worcestershire sauce and cook until sauce reaches a glazed consistency. Serve.

Destination: Saitama

Events In and Around the Prefecture



● **Leonardo Da Vinci e L'idea Della Bellezza** Now through June 10, 10:00-19:00 (Saturdays until 21:00) at the Bunkamura Museum. While the MemoRandom editors do their best to publicize Saitama events to our English-speaking readers, some events are too great to confine to borders, and anything Da Vinci-related is one of them. *Mona Lisa? Annunciation?* Yes please! Tickets at ¥1500 purchasable at the museum or online (Japanese) at www.e-tix.jp/davinci2012/. **Access:** From Shibuya (渋谷) station: 7 min. from the Hachikō exit (ハチ公口); from the Tōkyū Tōyoko, Ginza, and Keiō Inokashira lines, 7 min.; from the Tōkyū Den'entoshi, Hanzōmon, and Fukutoshin lines, 5 min. from Exit 3a. Map at www.bunkamura.co.jp/access/. **More Info** at davinci2012.jp/index.html (Japanese) and 03.5777.8600.

● **Washi Festival** May 19-20 (Sat.-Sun.) in Higashi Chichibu (東秩父). It is the Far East of Chichibu. It's Saitama's last remaining village. And it also has a papermaking tradition over 1300 years old. Soon after papermaking was brought to Japan from China, Higashi Chichibu and the surrounding area became production centers for washi (Japanese paper), supplying the imperial court in Nara. The washi tradition is still carried on, and this festival features exhibitions, performances, and a chance for visitors to make *washi*, paper decorations, soba, and more. **Access:** From Yorii (寄居) station on the Tōbu Tōjō (東武東上), Hachikō (八高), and Chichibu Tetsudō (秩父鉄道) lines, take the village bus (村営, *son'ei basu*) to Washi no Sato (和紙の里), ca. 25 min. From Ogawa-machi (小川町) station (Saitama, not Tokyo!) take the Rosen Bus for Shira-ishi/Kaiya (路線バス 白石・皆谷) ca. 15 min. and get off at Gakkō Iriguchi (学校入り口) and walk 3 minutes.

● **B Cuisine Festival** May 27 (Sun.) at the Kumagaya Sports & Culture Park (熊谷スポーツ文化公園, *Kumagaya Supōtsu Bunka Kōen*) in Kumagaya. Featuring classic and local dishes, a special competition will also be held to showcase new foods. Visitors vote for their favorites and are sure to walk away with a full belly **Access:** From Kumagaya (熊谷) station on the Chichibu Tetsudō and Takasaki (高崎) lines take the bus for Kumagaya Supōtsu Bunka Kōen and get off at *Kumagaya Dōmu* (くまがやドーム). **More Info** www.kumagaya-kanko.jp/kumab.html (Japanese).

● **Floating Irises** June 10-17 in Kazo. Much of Japanese domestic tourism seems to revolve around flowers, a mystery that even an extensive 20-minute Google search hasn't solved. Of Saitama's 18,492 flower-related festivals, Kazo's floating irises will give Jets a close, per-

sonal day with the prefecture. Irises bloom in an area called the “floating field village” (浮野の里, *ukiya no sato*). Underground channels left by glaciers cool the ground above, creating peat beds, and a number of endangered plants grow here. During the iris festival paddy field boats give visitors a peaceful look at the blooming flowers. **Access:** Set aside some time for this one. From the north exit of Kazo (加須) station, you can take a taxi (ca. ¥1700) or the city loop bus from the Kazo City Hall (straight down the street: departs 8:30, 11:33, and 15:00). Or take in the 4.5 km of scenery and walk or rent a bicycle from the Kazo Commerce and Industry building (加須商工会館, *Kazo Shōkō Kaikan*). For PDF maps (Japanese), go to tinyurl.com/7bwkl65 and tinyurl.com/6uvfop3.



Flower tourism: Boosting domestic camera sales one blossom at a time.
Photo credit: TANAKA Juuyoh (田中十洋)

- **Ancient Lotus Blossoms** From mid-June in Gyōda. In 1971 water began collecting in a hole dug for a construction project. Two years later lotuses appeared, and scientists estimate they date back anywhere between 1400 to 3000 years. They continue to bloom today, and really, where else can you say you’ve seen a 3000-year old flower? While in town also check out Oshijo Castle, over 500 years old, and the Sakitama burial mounds (*kofun*), dating back to the 5th Century. **Access:** A city loop bus runs from Gyōda (行田) station on the Takasaki line and Gyōda-shi (行田市) station on the Chichibu Tetsudō line; get off at *Kodai Hasu no Sato* (古代蓮の里). Time tables are at www.ikiiki-zaidan.or.jp/kodaihasu/3.htm. **More Info** at www.ikiiki-zaidan.or.jp/kodaihasu (Japanese).
- **Stand Alone Zone** June 23 (Sat.) at 15:00. Performed by the French dance company Systeme Castafiore on their international tour, this futuristic piece features a combination of detailed computer images, live sets, and creative imagery to tell a story set hundreds of years in the future where a hidden chamber in the Zone supposedly holds the world’s secrets. Tickets ¥2500-¥3000. **Access:** 7-min. from Yono Honmachi (与野本町) station on the Sai-kyō (埼京) line. Map at saf.or.jp/arthall/guide/access.html. **More Info** A more detailed synopsis is at tinyurl.com/6qendq4; tickets can be purchased via 0570.064.939 (10:00-19:00).

Tips to Save 10%

Denise Schlickbernd

It's everyone's favorite electricity company, and after brilliantly mishandling its 10% raise in electricity rates for large-unit users earlier this year, TEPCO is planning to raise rates in July for households by the same 10%. For those looking for information on how to conserve a little electricity in order to offset the hike, and go green in the process, here are a few ideas beyond the standard light-switching, one-room cooling routine.

Keeping Cool

Obviously, you can reduce consumption by keeping the AC thermostat up during the summer. But don't forget about the air filter; keeping it free from dust and lint significantly reduces energy use *and* cools the room quicker. AC units consume even larger amounts of electricity if constantly turned off and on; if you're leaving the room for just 10 or 15 minutes, it's cheaper to leave it running. Try to keep air circulating around the outside unit. Prevent heat from getting in by growing a "green curtain" to provide natural shade (cucumbers and goya/bitter melon work well), and put infrared-cutting film on your windows; ask your local home center for *sekigaisen katto firumu* (赤外線カットフィルム).

You can also keep your home cooler even in warm temperatures by opening windows and/or using fans to create a cross-breeze. Though it can seem impossible to live with the thermostat set at anything lower than 22°C/72°F during the summer, if you give your body the chance to adjust to the heat, it usually can. In the meantime, keep hydrated with cold drinks, hand fans, and light, loose clothing. Soak your feet in cold water, keep moistened towels in the fridge

or freezer and wrap them around your neck, and take cool showers before going to bed.

Stand-by Power

A number of appliances consume electricity even when not in active use, particularly if they have internal clocks. This includes microwaves, computers, DVD players, stereo systems, battery chargers, and TV sets in "instant on" mode. Though the amount of electricity each of these consumes is comparatively small, the appliances and the days add up. To cut consumption, unplug from the outlet or keep them into a power strip and switch off when not in use. Change your laptop settings to set it into off-screen and hibernation mode quicker, and switch it off when not in use.

The Kitchen

Small changes here add up too: don't "pre-boil" water, and use less of it, when cooking things like pasta. Skip the mixer and the automatic slicer for manually powered meal preparation. Dry the bottoms of pots and pans before putting them on the stove to heat up, and match them to the size of the stove plate. Don't overstock your fridge to allow the air to circulate more easily.

You can also cut back on both electricity and gas by making dishes like salads and sandwiches that require little or no cooking. Switch the heavier, high-carbohydrate and high-protein foods such as meat, dairy, and potatoes for those with higher water content such as fruits and vegetables, which are cooler for your body to handle in the heat.

If you really want to try something off-grid, you can heat your water with your own easy-to-make solar water heater. Try tinyurl.com/d2adlen to get started.



PA Corner

Saitama Orientation Assistants Wanted

Summer is coming, and with it 16 new Jets to the prefecture. Saitama Orientation will be held on Friday August 10 and a second day including *kenshū* open to all Jets on Monday August 20, and the Saitama JET Council is recruiting Saitama Orientation Assistants (SOAs) to welcome the new arrivals to the Sai-no-kuni. SOAs will lead prefecture and regional information sessions and assist with education presentations and other tasks as required. Applications are open to all Jets seeking reappointment for the 2012-2013 year. More information will be sent to COs at the end of May. SOAs are indispensable to the success of each year's orientation, so *yoroshiku onegaishimasu!*

Saitama Jet Yearbook Reminder

Sure you have digital photo files and Facebook wall posts from your fellow Saitamans, but there's something about holding in your hand a concrete reminder of your year in the prefecture that isn't subject to file data corruption or the whims of Mark Zuckerberg. To save your spot in Saitama's leading annual publication, send in your profile to Simon no later than Friday, May 25 (profile forms have already been sent, but contact a PA if you still need the file).

Information for Leaving Jets

The International Division also has useful information on its page for Jets (www.pref.saitama.lg.jp/site/kouryukyoryoku/jet-participants.html) for those leaving the Programme this summer. The Predecessor's Guide to Saitama allows you to achieve super senpai status by giving your successor all the information they need to know about their new placement in one easy-to-use form. The Leaver's Guide gives you a run-down of the different procedures and such during the last few months; the

2012 edition is still being updated as of MemoRandom press time, but last year's version can still be accessed in the meantime.

Third-Year Jets: Don't Forget to Extend Your Visas!

If you're staying for a fourth year in Japan, don't forget that your status of residence (also colloquially referred to as visas) is only good for three years; to stay for longer you'll need to apply to extend your period of stay. Immigration can begin processing your application up to two months before your current status of residence expires, and processing usually takes 2-4 weeks. Applicants will need to visit the regional immigration bureau twice (special leave may be given at the discretion of schools or COs). It costs ¥4000 and you will need to prepare documents in advance. For details, go to www.immi-moj.go.jp/english/tetuduki/kanri/shyorui/03.html. For directions to the bureau, go to www.immi-moj.go.jp/english/keiziban/happyou/20100903_saitam_en.pdf. ※ The new resident management system will begin on July 9. Foreign residents who extend their status of residence after this date can also get their shiny new resident card, too, saving an extra trip down the line.

4th Year Jets: Check your foreigner cards

If you're staying a fifth year, remember that your foreigner registration card will expire before your time on the JET Programme is up. Because of the new residency management system for foreigners, you will need to apply for your new resident card at the regional immigration bureau (details and directions above). Jets can generally take special leave for this, although it is at the discretion of COs. Double check your card for the expiration date and be sure to have it updated in time.



Editor's Note

Along the path of our Golden Week travels earlier in May, a friend and I happened to meet a man named Imai-san who is a salt maker. Until then, the most thought I had ever given to salt was when I needed to pick some up at the store, and my purchase was selected based only on price; after all, salt is salt, right? But Imai-san talked about the salt-making process showing us the steaming tubs where the sea water slowly boiled away, the barrels where the crystallized salt and minerals separated from the *nigari* (magnesium chloride, used to make tofu), and the room where it dried and impurities were painstakingly removed by hand. The composition and flavor of the brine, he explained, change depending on the weather and time of year, and it must be carefully watched to prevent it from becoming too bitter or losing too many of the other minerals. And he learned all of this from one of the only traditional salt makers who survived a 92-year long government monopoly that ended in just 1997.

It was fascinating to learn this small part of the history of his work, but it was just as fascinating to see the world that lay behind something so seemingly minor. It was a reminder that behind the things we pass over as simple and inconsequential may lie new worlds awaiting our discovery.

—Denise Schlickbernd

PREFECTURAL ADVISORS

International Division

Denise Schlickbernd [a2705-02 at pref.saitama.lg.jp](mailto:a2705-02@pref.saitama.lg.jp) 048.830.2708
Tomoko Kawamura [kawamura.tomoko at pref.saitama.lg.jp](mailto:kawamura.tomoko@pref.saitama.lg.jp) 048.830.2704
Kaori Fujinami [fujinami.kaori at pref.saitama.lg.jp](mailto:fujinami.kaori@pref.saitama.lg.jp) 048.830.2708

Prefectural Board of Education

Simon Free [a6760-32 at pref.saitama.lg.jp](mailto:a6760-32@pref.saitama.lg.jp) 048.833.0548
Diego Yonamine [a6760-29 at pref.saitama.lg.jp](mailto:a6760-29@pref.saitama.lg.jp) 048.833.0548
Eden Aquino [a6760-31 at pref.saitama.lg.jp](mailto:a6760-31@pref.saitama.lg.jp) 048.822.0899
Mikihiro Sakashita [sakashita.mikihiro at pref.saitama.lg.jp](mailto:sakashita.mikihiro@pref.saitama.lg.jp) 048.833.7391
Akira Mochida [mochida.akira at pref.saitama.lg.jp](mailto:mochida.akira@pref.saitama.lg.jp) 048.833.7391

EDITORS & PUBLISHERS

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Please send your contributions to:

Denise Schlickbernd
International Division
Saitama Prefectural Government
3-15-1 Takasago, Urawa-ku
Saitama-shi, Saitama 330-9301

Phone: 048.830.2708

Fax: 048.830.4748

Email: [a2705-02 at pref.saitama.lg.jp](mailto:a2705-02@pref.saitama.lg.jp)

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Stephen Welch
Raina Ong
Karl Hoeschen
Eden Aquino

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