Welcome!

Welcome to a coastal prefecture surrounded by stunning mountain views where owara is danced into the night along streets lit with paper lanterns, rows of rice sway in the breeze, and fields of tulips appear in the spring.

My name is Colin Cartwright. I am the Prefectural Advisor for Toyama. Congratulations on being selected as a Toyama JET! Toyama is a cozy countryside filled with amazing people, places, and opportunities. You are arriving at an exciting time for Toyama. With the Hokuriku Shinkansen recently completed in March, more Japanese and foreigners than ever before are experiencing all that Toyama has to offer. And when you feel like a change of scene, Tokyo is only two hours away by bullet train and Osaka, Kyoto, and Nagoya are easily accessible—just a three or four hour train ride away.

Our local AJET chapter organizes events and excursions for the 80 plus members of our community. Regional Representatives will also plan events throughout the year. The community itself is active and offers a lot of opportunities to pursue music, art, or sports.

There are three PAs in Toyama. Including me, the JET PA, you have Yoshikuni sensei and Hirose sensei as the two Japanese PAs. You will see us directing all of the orientations, seminars, and meetings you will attend. We do our best to keep you updated with all the important information and relaying news as soon as we get it.

Anytime you have a question or concern about making the transition over here whether it is work-related issues, medical needs, or any other stressful situation, we are here to provide support. You always have someone you can turn to.

Our JETs have put together this welcome packet, covering almost every topic you could imagine. These letters were written to help provide a glimpse of what is to come and insight into what life in Toyama holds, as well as the many resources available to make your life more comfortable. Enjoy reading. We look forward to greeting you in person very soon.

Please don’t hesitate to contact me, even if it is just a simple hello. You can also take a look at the Toyama JETs website http://www.toyamajets.net. If you would like to get in touch with your soon-to-be peers, you can out The Tram, Toyama AJETs online magazine, at http://the-tram.com/ and the Toyama Community facebook group.

Take Care,

Colin Cartwright
Toyama ALT Prefectural Advisor
toyamapa@gmail.com
# 2015 Toyama Welcome Letters

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Life in Toyama – The Prefecture of Manufacturing!

So, statistically speaking, you did not pick Toyama as your first choice. It tends to fly under the radar. If, like us, you just gleaned what you could from Wikipedia, you probably know by now that Toyama has some mountains, some rice, and some factories. But did you know we also have the lowest number of fatal house fires in the country? Or that Toyama invented a kind of robotic seal that comforts senior citizens as they near death?

Here are some undisputed facts about Toyama life: it is slow, and it is beautiful. In the countryside, you will soon be able to recognize the train station attendants and clerks at your local convenience store. In the city, you have a little more variety, but everything pretty much closes up by nightfall. You’ll soon have a regular bar and a go-to restaurant. If you like nature, good news! We have gorgeous mountains. In the winter the alps look like they’re painted, and in the spring the cherry blossoms and tulips will melt your face right off. There are endless chances to go hiking, swimming, and exploring. The summer is full of festivals and beer and fireworks, with every weekend ending in battered streamers and folded-up takoyaki stands.

You’ll hear a lot about the pride points of Toyama—the rice, fresh fish, and delicious water. Believe the hype, man, it’s all true. Your town has its own specialty food, flower, and character. Fukumitsu is known for dried persimmons and an underground all-you-can-drink karaoke spot. Tonami hosted almost a million people at the tulip festival last month. By the end of this stay, you will have a preferred ramen shop and flavor of bottled tea. You will be able to correctly identify each region’s anthropomorphic water drop, mountainside, or flaming deer mascot. When you’re returning to Toyama from a trip, on a three hour train leg or ten hour plane ride out over the pacific, you’ll say: man, I can’t wait to get home.

When you first get here there’ll probably be a lot of things you don’t understand, which can be stressful. The road signs. Why it’s so hot. Why you can’t use ATMs after a certain time. Why there are no rubbish bins anywhere. Why it’s so hot. The difference between cooking oil and vinegar at the supermarket. Why your coworker has a pink bag decorated with cupcakes and teddy bears and the inexplicable phrase “There’s a macaroon which looks like a swag.” Why it’s so hot. Why your pants are melting.

Most of us didn’t understand any of this stuff at first either, and some of us still don’t. What does a swag look like? The point is, we’re here to help. Packing up and moving to Japan is a terrifying concept for everyone who does it, without exception. But we all did it, and most of us chose to stay for longer than we’d intended.

You’re here to teach English, and some days it will be amazing, others less so. That’s ok! Teaching is a job like any other, and you are allowed to be tired, or want to talk about something else, anything else, when you’re out with other JETs. Don’t worry, don’t stress, and don’t take a nightmarish class personally. You can try again and again to make a class work, and eventually it will. Be kind to yourself! Make sure you have a life outside of your job, a room of your own, so to speak. Prepare yourself for not-so-stellar days by cultivating a hobby or activity outside of work that is reviving and fulfilling. There are groups and outlets for every possible interest, and many, many chances to try something new.
You’re living in Japan, but the secret is that life here is still everyday life. You still have to take out the trash, replace light bulbs, curse at your empty refrigerator and go to the grocery store. Those things might be harder, at first, but you’ll be surprised by how quickly it all fades into the background. I promise you, even if the first week seems impossible, even if it’s six pm and you’re drenched in sweat, poking at a microwave and cursing the air con unit in your musky apartment, you will adapt. If you are shy, you’ll be brave. If you don’t speak any Japanese, you’ll learn. And your chicken will only have that slight acidic taste once before you get that whole cooking oil/vinegar issue down.

The best part of this life is definitely the people, strangers or friends, who will step forward to help you. It can be intimidating coming to a town where you know nobody, but where everybody seems to know who you are. The locals will stare, sure. But here’s the deal: the locals are friendly. They want to be friends. They want to help you. With a little bit of effort, you’ll find it’s not all that difficult to break down cultural and linguistic barriers.

Same goes for the JET community too, by the way. We want to be your friends, and we want to help. We’re in this thing with you. We’re also from all over the world, so while it can be difficult to understand when some of us pronounce certain words slightly differently, some would say more correctly, we’re actually pretty damn good at speaking English on the whole. So don’t be a stranger. Come party.

This is a great opportunity, but it is also a year of your life, like any other year. Be kind to yourself. Don’t expect the impossible. Travel, if you can, day trips or abroad. Send money home or save up. Make the most of your year, but remember that it’s ok to just hang out and watch TV after a day of work.

Welcome to Toyama. You are totally not going to die in a house fire here.

PS: If you were hoping for a few more helpful facts about Toyama, here are some quotes we plucked out of context from the Toyama BOE’s ‘English Handbook of TOYAMA for High School Students’, and put in all-caps for emphasis:

DO YOU KNOW THE ZIPPER IN YOUR JACKET IS PRODUCED BY A COMPANY IN TOYAMA?
WE CAN LIVE HERE WITHOUT A CAR.
BUILDINGS IN TOYAMA ARE VERY INTERESTING.
THE MUSEUM IN TOYAMA IS A REAL ONE!
TOYAMA RANKS AT OR NEAR THE TOP IN JAPAN FOR HOMEOWNERSHIP RATE AND AVERAGE FLOOR SPACE.
THERE IS A GLACIER IN TOYAMA IN JAPAN. IT IS A BIG SURPRISE.
PEOPLE IN THE WHOLE COMMUNITY PREVENT FIRES.
IT HAS A RESILIENT TEXTURE.
I LIKE MOUNTAINS AND VEHICLES VERY MUCH.

Wishing you all the best,

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Tom Hay
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Packing—What to Bring

Welcome to a letter about packing,

Congratulations on getting to this point and I look forward to meeting you in summer. Packing – this is something that you all will be encountering over the next month or so, depending on when you get this and how prepared you are. I have tried to think of everything I thought about, what actually worked, what didn’t and what other people have experienced too. I have compiled all my advice into six sections for you!

SUITCASES
I brought two suitcases, one was filled with clothes mainly and the other was filled with medicine, sentimental things, toiletries and gifts. All of this I will go into in the subsequent sections! Check with your particular airline about extra baggage. I was worried there would be a point where they would say they had too many bags with everyone on the flight bringing an extra one, but a lovely airline employee told me that they will always accept the extras bag, they have the space and they will take your money from you to pay for the extra fuel. But, it is always best to check in advance about a second bag, the cost and weight restrictions to see what the situation is.

When we got to Tokyo, we were only allowed to take one bag with us to orientation and the others were shipped to our schools from the airport. It’s all highly organised, so don’t worry. Some people decided to keep one of their large suitcases with them, most people just kept their hand luggage bag with them. So be prepared with everything packed accordingly in the right bag. You do not want to re-pack in a Tokyo Airport after a long flight!

In these hand luggage bags, we needed everything for Tokyo Orientation, which was three days and then travelling to Toyama on the fourth day. For this you need smart clothes, including a jacket and everything else you need to survive for three days. Also keep some room in this bag for the pile of paperwork you will get in Orientation, it will be a tidy sum!

CLOTHES
So, you will be arriving in summer and after reading the Toyama Wikipedia page a
dozen times, you’ll know it’s hot in summer, so you will need light summery clothes. Pack for the summer season because other things, such as winter things, can be shipped out once you arrive in Japan. I brought a few wintery things, such as a hat and a winter coat (which was used as padding to protect things in my suitcase, duel usage) and that was it. Other things were bought in Japan or posted out.

There is another letter about being tall in Japan, but if you are worried about finding things that fit, bring more with you or have it posted out. The size and fit of clothes is different, so be prepared that you may jump from a S/M to a Large. Welcome to Japan. If it is a concern, you can see the situation here and if fitting is an issue. Sometimes it’s just the small things like tights, not going to happen if you’re over 170cm. I know a lot of people who ship all shoes, all clothes and underwear out. It can be done.

So, you’re going to work in a school, or be a CIR in a government office! [Note for our new CIR; so I’m an ALT, but from CIR friends, I would play it safe with suits. I’ve never seen any of them casual at work. So any mention below of being casual, is probably only for ALTs. But welcome and by all means read on.]

For school, you will need smart clothes. For formal occasions, such as graduation, Tokyo orientation, your first day and any day they want you to look extra smart, you will need a suit. Keep a blazer or jacket at school, you never know when they will spring a ceremony on you. Ask your predecessor about your school, as everyone’s school is different on what they expect. I know ALTs whose school wants them in a tie and suit every day of the year, some where a smart pair of trousers, shirt and jumper is okay, or smart trousers with a polo t-shirt. It all depends on your age range and what your school is like, so quiz your predecessor on it. But probably the best way to get the low down is to see what all other teachers wear and wear what they wear. This is the time to follow the crowd until you get a feel for the lay of the land and see what you feel comfortable in and what works for your school. But probably the best way to the lay of the land is to follow some logic on your first day, and then copy the teachers until you find your own groove.

PERSONAL
You will have probably, or if not will now, google ‘JET Programme Packing Tips’, to look for an ultimate list of things to bring, or other peoples advice on what they brought. Rewind to just under a year ago and that was me! Sat there on my Mom’s sofa reading out all the things people were advising and said they couldn’t get out here. The list was endless and I was just getting more and more surprised at the things I was reading. I was going to Japan, not the middle of Antarctica. So let’s quash some of this!

Japan has deodorant and some of it’s not bad; it’s just different. So if you have a spray and roll brand you like, bring it with you. You may be able to find some of the brands you like here in Japan, but they will probably cost an astonishing amount more than at home. So bring it!

Toothpaste. Japan has this too, but most Japanese toothpastes don’t have the magic ingredient fluoride, which I didn’t even know about before I came here. There is Colgate here and other fluoride brands; again it may set you back a pretty penny. Maybe you see the theme: if you want it, pay for it, or ship it out.

Menstruation items: Japan has tampons. The fact it doesn’t is a myth, Japanese women have periods too. Sanitary towels seem to be a more popular way to deal with a period, but you can get tampons. There are only a handful of brands and the shelves aren’t usually overflowing with stock, but it is an option. Again, if you are particular about a brand or type, bring it or post it.
The other thing that you may need that is specific is medicine. You are only allowed to bring in one month of prescription medicine into Japan, unless you have your Yakkan Shomei certificate. Then you can bring in one year of medicine. This is something that my embassy helped me with and I had to sort before I departed for Japan, it takes some time, so go start it right now. Be careful when bringing non-prescription medicine in with you, some over the counter brands from back home, are not allowed in Japan—so check.

SENTIMENTAL
So you have some clothes and medicine in one or two suitcases on your bedroom floor, what next; for me it was sentimental things. Personally this was important and I brought a few things with me, mainly photos, notes and cards, three books, one ornamental Russian doll and two blankets.

Photos and cards are great, small, and lightweight, so pack them in. I wouldn’t suggest bringing many/if any books at all—they’re heavy. For me one of the books was the book I was currently reading and the other two were presents including a guidebook for Japan. But try to keep books to a minimum. Amazon.jp stocks books and The Book Depository has free worldwide delivery, so both are easy options. The Russian doll I suppose symbolizes something sentimental but that isn’t practical. I recommend packing a couple of things like these, as there is nothing wrong with making your new place a bit homely. The final things that I brought that were sentimental were two blankets; I personally justified this that they were padding to protect each suitcase.

But whether it’s something practical, useful or just sentimental, you’re moving to another country and if you want to bring something that will be a bit of home, and it fits in your suitcase, go for it!

OMIYAGE (gifts)
There will be a lot of talk about omiyage and what to bring. This was a large section of one of my suitcases and I worried about it a wee bit. It is polite to bring a small present for all members of staff at your new school. This may seem daunting, but we’ve all done it before you, so you’ll be grand. It’s probably best if it is individually wrapped, I personally brought hard boiled British Worther’s Original Sweets. Every teacher had around 4 or 5 and I brought little organza bags to put them in. Whilst people loved the sweets, a lot of the teachers loved the little bags. With the summer you will be arriving in, some people suggest no chocolate, but I know some people that did it. Some people bring other food/biscuits, alcohol, small trinkets or tourist nick naks. Either way, everyone will be excited and it’s extra nice to have something that’s personal, maybe from the city or area you are from. Everyone loves something new, unusual and with a story!

Then there will be your Japanese Teachers of English and higher management of the school. Ask your predecessor about how many JTEs you have and principles, vice-principles and head teachers. It is advised that you buy these people something a little special, as they will be the people you are working with most and the higher up people at school. Ask your predecessor not only how many there are, but also if they have any advice or thoughts. I would get people of the same position, the same or similar presents, keep it easy. They’ve worked with these people for at least 10 months by this point, even if they’re a first year. Pick their brains, but also don’t worry too much!

SCHOOL
So, the final thing that went into my suitcase was random things for school. Things I
thought may be useful from home, but wasn’t really sure about. At this point, oh yes, I’m going to say it again, ask your predecessor for their advice! Maybe you’re at a school where you stick to a text book, or have no text book; you might have teachers that love games or visual things. Just to give you a hand and some guidance in what you could bring and what would be useful. I brought some money with me; a map of Great Britain, a small flag, tourist pamphlets - anything I could think of that was really cheap and I thought might be useful. Anything that shows off your home town, your family and your country will go down a storm. A lot of people I met when I first got here were extremely organized and had gone to tourist offices and got lots of things. You will be using this at school, international events and festivals, so it will be useful. It is also a way to show things about your country without the focus being on language. Any space in your suitcase, fill it with random things you can show your new students. But of course, nothing you care about too much, there will be hundreds of hands wanting to have a touch of these new and wonderful things.

So the key points are:

- Bring what you want and what you think will be useful. In the confused and mad time before you leave, just do your best.
- Bring anything that is vital to your life, sentimental things and medicine especially.
- Bring smart clothes for school and Tokyo Orientation; try to pack these thoughtfully so you don’t have to re-pack at the airport.
- Relax, it’ll be okay. There’s a big community waiting in Toyama to help you out when you get here.
- Anything you forget and really need, you can ship out! But you’ll be surprised by all the things you don’t actually miss 😊

So I guess that’s it and all that is left to say is, pack, have a great last few weeks in your home country, have a safe flight, have a wonderful time in Tokyo and I look forward to meeting you when you arrive in Toyama!

All the best, Kate

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**Making an Impression**

Hello! Welcome.

Let’s chat a little bit about how to handle those first few days at work, and make that all important first impression count.

At the start, you’re going to want to look your best. Show up for that first day in business attire. Black suits, neck tie, skirts, dress shirts, all that. Don’t go overboard on accessories, keep your hair (head and otherwise) neat. Have tattoos? Cover them at first. This is a professional position so look the part – at least in the beginning.

See, formality can relax over time. There are schools where it’s okay to wear jeans and a T-Shirt. Others are gonna necessitate a suit (or the like) every day. Most will fall somewhere in the middle. You can usually get a good idea of where it will end up by looking at your JTEs. If ever you’re unsure, mirror them.

Your primary role is to interact with the students, so do just that! Talk to them in easy
English, ask about their day and their clubs. Greet them in the morning. Resist the urge to use lots of Japanese, even if that means keeping things simple at first.

I know most of you are excited to be here – demonstrate that! Talk to your fellow teachers, and learn their names. Greet people in the morning, say goodbye in the afternoon. If you don’t know Japanese, learn it! Practice it! For the introverts out there, this is going to be difficult, but it’s something you need to try to do.

A secondary aspect of the program is cultural exposure. Be ready to share about where you’re from and who you are (try to get used to answering the same three or four questions hundreds of times). By the same token, try to get involved in your community and school. Don’t be shy if someone asks you to help or join in! If you’re uncomfortable, then you should certainly decline; but be open to new experiences!

Above all, be yourself. You made it here because of that.

Christopher Brown
Prefectural ALT
Fukuno Senior High School

Your First Month in Japan

Hello and welcome to Toyama! I hope you’re all excited about starting your new life in Japan. If you’re anything like me, though, you’re at least a little nervous—at least a little nervous—after hectic months of gathering endless forms, packing my life into two insufficient suitcases, and saying goodbye to my family and friends, I was pretty frazzled. So let me allay some of that fear right now by saying this—you have plenty of support throughout Toyama, from your supervisor and Prefectural Advisors (PAs) to lots of friendly and knowledgeable JETs who can help you with everything from grocery shopping to finding a good bar on a Friday night. You may be embarking on a new adventure, but you won’t have to do it alone.

So, if you’re reading this, you’re probably dying to know what’s going to happen during your first month in Japan. The good thing is that you’ll be arriving during summer vacation, so you won’t be diving right into the classroom action. You’ll have plenty of time to get settled into your new life before school starts in September. So, let’s kick off this letter with the place where everything begins: Tokyo.

Tokyo Orientation

First and foremost, as much as I’d like to give you as detailed and informative of an overview as possible, I have to say what you’ve probably heard a million times by now: Every Situation Is Different. Some of this stuff may not apply to you at all, but I’ll try to give you the rundown of the most common things that happen during summer break. That being said, let’s get started!

Your first day in Tokyo will be a laid back one, since JETs will be arriving all day long. Pro Tip #1: Try to let your body adjust to the new time by going to bed at as close to a normal bedtime as possible. Even if you’re worn out, you’ll be up in the middle of the night if you go to sleep at 4 p.m., with a full day of orientation ahead of you that won’t start for hours. Similarly, don’t stay out all night partying – Tokyo Orientation is your first real information session, designed to prepare you for your duties as an ALT and introduce you to the people who will be supporting you throughout the year (like your PAs). I know, it’s Tokyo and you’ll want to explore, but the next several days will be long ones and snoring during meetings makes a pretty bad
impression. Besides, you’ll have a whole year to revisit and Tokyo is a lot more fun when you’re not pressed for time.

**Toyama Arrival**

On your third day in Japan, you’ll experience more hurry-up-and-wait action as you get ready to fly into Toyama. Let me warn you that if you think Tokyo is hot, Toyama is BEASTLY. But nonetheless, make sure you’re dressed to impress when you arrive. The first person you’ll meet when you step off the plane is likely to be your supervisor, and you may even be taken to your base school or home office to meet the staff and/or your JTEs. Pro Tip #2: Buy a handkerchief at the konbini (convenience store) if you can so you can sweat on it and not your supervisor.

If you speak some Japanese, feel free to introduce yourself in Japanese, followed by your new favorite phrase: *yoroshiku onegaishimasu*. Very roughly translated, it means something akin to ‘Please help me’ or ‘I’m looking forward to working with you’ and you will hear this so often that it will be ingrained within a few months. Once you let the Japanese cat out of the bag, though, be prepared for the subsequent onslaught of chitchat. Even if you think your Japanese is awful, people will be impressed that you speak it at all and if they don’t speak English, they will feel much more at ease. On the flip side, if you don’t speak Japanese, don’t worry in the slightest — after all, you’re here to teach *English*, and you won’t be the first (or last) ALT who doesn’t speak Japanese. But if you are willing to try learning it, your efforts will be greatly appreciated and it will make your life in Japan much easier.

At some point, you’ll probably spend at least part of your first day taking a tour around the town to point out stores (and do a little shopping, say, for toilet paper and breakfast), the nearest train station (check www.hyperdia.com/en/ for train times), points of interest and so on. Your supervisor will also take you to pick up your luggage and drop you off at your apartment, where someone will come to check that your water, gas and electricity are working properly if they haven’t done so already. This is a good time to ask your supervisor about any unfamiliar (or unreadable) appliances in your home, trash collection, who to contact if something breaks, etc. And once your busy day is finally done, take some time to relax, as you may be expected to report to your school or office the following morning.

The next few things I’m going to talk about will probably get taken care of before your first week is out. I did most of this stuff the day I got here but again: ESID! You’ve got plenty of time to get everything done but these are some important basics, so take a deep breath and let’s dive in.

**Juuminhyō**

One of the first things you will do is register at city hall with your supervisor. For this, you will need your passport, your residence card (which you should receive at Narita Airport) and your *hanko*, or personal seal (which you should receive from your supervisor). Your *hanko* is your official signature and you will need it to fill out just about any important document, so make sure you don’t lose it. After you’ve filled out some forms, you should receive your *juuminhyō*, or residency certificate. If you don’t receive one, you can always ask for one or go back another time to get it — if you plan on buying a car, for example, you’re going to need it.

**Opening a Bank Account**

Banks close at 3 p.m. so you may not have time to do this on your first day. Keep in mind that you will need an opening deposit for this (probably not much, mine was 1000 yen). You will receive your bank book the same day, but your ATM card won’t be mailed until later and most places don’t take credit cards, so make sure to keep some cash on you. Your bank book can only be inserted directly into the ATM to get a record of your transactions, but is also needed to set up automatic deposits for your paycheck and withdrawals for your bills. Pro Tip #3: To avoid unnecessary trips back to your apartment these first few days, keep your bank book, residence card, passport, *hanko* and/or *juuminhyō* with you until you’re sure you don’t need them anymore. Once
you’re all settled, put them someplace safe and don’t lose them!

Phone Service
Pretty much every bill you receive, including rent and utilities, will be automatically withdrawn from your account, so once you’ve got your bank book, you’re ready to buy a phone. Pro Tip #4: A smartphone will be your best friend. Personally, I can’t find my way out of a paper bag without Google Maps and having a Japanese dictionary and kanji app (I recommend JEDict Lite) on hand will be extremely helpful once you start exploring on your own, which I STRONGLY recommend you do in your free time so you won’t starve to death before you find a grocery store or freeze to death this winter because you don’t know where to buy a sweater. Internet and cable, though, will be largely up to you; just keep in mind that it can take months for internet to be installed.

Your Schools
Inevitably, you will be taken to your school (or schools, if you have several) and introduced to the staff and your JTEs. You may be invited to chat with the principal (or vice-principal) so he or she can get to know you a bit before you are introduced to the entire school during the opening ceremony in September. Even though you’ll be going to work daily, you won’t have much to do until classes start, so I would highly suggest that you use some of your free time to write a short speech for this (you may be asked to write it in Japanese if you are capable of doing so). In addition, you will probably do a self-introduction PowerPoint presentation for your individual classes, perhaps for an entire 50-minute lesson, so you may want to work on one. Include as many pictures as possible of your hometown, your family and friends, your hobbies and interests, or whatever else you think is interesting about you (internet photos are also OK). If you can, be sure to explore your schools, too. Find out where supplies are kept, check out your predecessor’s English board (or make your own) and take a look at the English textbooks so you’ll know what your students can understand. You can even drop in on club activities, as these continue all year round, and say hello to some of your new students.

Now let’s get into some other things you may get to do during the summer vacation:

Toyama Orientation: Okay, I lied a little – you definitely have to do this part. All meetings are mandatory, and you can expect to attend two shortly after you arrive before a final outing just for fun. You should have already met the PAs by then, but you’ll get to meet all of the new Toyama ALTs, and some of the current ALTs and AJET Committee members. You’ll also get lots more in-depth information about practical things like paychecks, income tax, vacation time, and upcoming meetings, and you can let your PAs know if you’re having any immediate issues settling in.

Welcome Parties: Now for the fun part – there will be plenty of dinners, parties and even festivals going on in Toyama throughout the summer so take some time out to get to know the other JETs when you can. Pro Tip #5: Even if you came to Japan expecting to make Japanese friends and do Japanese things, don’t cut yourself off from the English-speaking world. Remember, you’re going to be here for an entire year; your family and friends are in a different time zone and it won’t hurt to have a few friends close by if culture shock sets in. Besides, Toyama JETs know how to throw a party, so check out the Toyama JET Facebook page so you don’t miss out!

English Summer Camps: English camps are fun-filled days of English games and activities, typically involving an overnight stay. If you’re invited to one, you will be notified well in advance of the date, location, number of students, etc. You may even be asked to plan some of the English games and activities, so think of it as a warm-up before you get into an actual classroom. Some of the kids may turn out to be your
students in the fall so this is a good chance to get to know them in a relaxed environment instead of a strenuous classroom.

**Speech Contests:** There will be English speech contests throughout the fall in a kind of tiered tournament – in my case, the first one takes place in August. Your JTEs may ask you to help with everything from writing the speech itself, to advising the students on intonation, pronunciation and gestures, to recording the speech for them to listen to and practice with on their own. You’ll probably practice with the students several times and attend the contest itself (and maybe even help judge it). Don’t be afraid to correct your students during these sessions – these are usually the students who actually like English and they want to win, and you’ll be insanely proud of them if they do!

**Health Check (Annual Physical):** Some of you won’t have yours until fall but again, you will be notified well in advance. This is also mandatory (even though you just had one before you came) so if you miss it, you will have to reschedule it on your own time and pay for it out of your own pocket, which is not cheap. You will have to fill out a form beforehand about pre-existing health conditions, family history and the like, just like you would before any doctor’s visit, so make sure to get that done as soon as possible. And just in case no one tells you ahead of time, don’t eat or drink anything but water the morning of your health check.

Whew! I think that covers just about everything I can think of that might be going on your first month in Toyama. If you need more nerve-soothing answers, you can always email your predecessor or your supervisor for more information, or even post your question to the Toyama JET Facebook page. We were all new JETs at some point, so we know exactly what you’re going through and we’re more than happy to help. Good luck in your preparations for your new life and again, congratulations – we can’t wait to see you all this fall!

Jocelyn Boatner
Himi-city, Toyama
icewithinice@sbcglobal.net

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**Your First Class (Self-Introduction)**

Hey all! Congratulations, welcome, and brace yourself for a very, very hot summer. And don’t forget summer’s friend, the very, very cold winter. I promise though that these are both things you can push to the back of your mind as you embark on what is going to be a fantastic year.

Now, after about a month of settling in the day will come for you to teach your first class. If that prospect makes you nervous just remember that to everyone else—your JTEs, your students, yourself (in the very near future, once your new job jitters have worn off)—this is actually just a regular class. A regular class with the added bonus that you’ll be talking about things your students are genuinely curious to hear. What’s your name? How do you pronounce your name? Where are you from? Where is that? In what way is it like/different from Toyama? What do you think of Toyama? What do you think of Japan? What do you miss most from home?
The trick now is to take this information and transform it into an engaging lesson. Here are a few things you’ll want to keep in mind.

**Thing one – Content**

Assemble a few items that represent you and your home country. Pictures are good; physical items are better. This gives your students something tangible to associate with you, and it also gives you an opportunity to do holiday/cultural lessons later on. Next do some web surfing. Find maps showing where you’re from, how far it is to Japan, interesting sights, etc… As you do this take time to reflect on your home and choose the points you most want to present to Japan. The more insight you can offer, the more your students can gain. And don’t worry, once you get to Japan you will have almost a month of prep time to just sit and think, so if nothing comes to mind right now then no doubt it will later.

**Thing two – Structure**

This letter is a bit wordy, isn’t it? Are you bored yet? I tried to make it interesting, but the fact is words can only hold a person’s attention for so long. Why don’t you look at this graph instead?

![Graph](image)

So what does that mean? *Don’t make your intro a listening comprehension test.* Use pictures, gestures, and step-by-step explanations. Pause often and make sure students have understood. Work with your JTE to create an atmosphere where checking comprehension is both easy and fun.

Next for your lesson plan: you’ve probably seen a million presentations over the years where the speaker talks for a few minutes, shows props or pictures, and then asks for questions. There’s a reason why this format is so popular—it works. But here are a few additional activities that your public speaking teacher probably never suggested:

**Quiz!** Have students guess about you and your country, and/or challenge them to remember interesting things you told them. You can be creative with the format too; for example, kids can show their answer by holding up fingers, (1, 2, or 3) write on small white boards, or physically move around the room. Show the answers with a flourish and offer a reward (stickers are always a hit, but a big smile does just as well).
**Self introduction worksheet:** This is a great way to get to know your students’ interests and writing ability. Show an example first and give them feedback when they’re done. Don’t forget to have them draw a picture!

**Gesture-name game:** Have students stand in a circle and one by one say their names with a gesture. After each new person the entire class must repeat back both the names and the gestures. (Runs the risk of you remembering students’ gestures more than their actual names.)

**What do you want to know?** Place pictures around the room and have students make a list of questions about you and your country based on what they see. Let their curiosity be your guide.

**Thing three (that thing everyone always forgets) – Logistics!**

There are a few things you’ll want to find out before every class. How many students will there be? Will you have access to AV? If so, how long will it take to set up? (a cautionary note: test, test, TEST your equipment before class and have a backup plan in case it fails). Last, what is the character of your class? Are students eager and outgoing? Or are they quiet as the grave? (e.g. JHS third-years)

Your JTEs and other staff will likely go out of their way to convey this information, but, as always, be proactive. Don’t let any important details slip through the cracks.

Why? Because your classroom environment determines the type of lesson you can teach. Having students introduce themselves individually is great for small classes but not so much for large ones. An intro worksheet might be an alternative as long as it matches students’ writing level. On the AV front, Microsoft PowerPoint is wonderfully versatile, with video, sound, and animations. But none of this does any good if your school’s only screen has no cable to connect to your laptop. Last, while an energetic class might pelt you with questions, a lethargic class might pelt you with questions, a lethargic class might… just…. stare at you… …

Fortunately the solution to all of these problems is simple: be FLEXIXIBLE. Have a plan with a backup plan. Complications happen, but you can conquer them with options. Can your activities be done in large groups? In small groups? In 50 minutes? In 10? Can they do it in the gym? Can they do it while they swim? Can they… Okay, sorry, I’ll stop now.

**Thing four—That’s enough things for now!**

Just remember, whatever you choose to do, act natural and relax. You’re building a relationship just as much as you are teaching a class, so make students’ first impression one they can rely on as they get to know you throughout the year. Try to find common ground: do you like matcha ice cream? Maybe they like it too! They’ll be curious about what is different, but comforted by what’s the same. And if you run into any trouble don’t sweat it—everyone makes mistakes. Even if you try your hardest there are some things you just can’t control. Keep your cool. Be yourself, and let your genuine will to communicate inspire students to try hard as well.

Safe travels this summer, and looking forward to meeting you!

Rose Thompson  
JHS ALT  
Takaoka City
Senior High School Life 101

Hello.

So, you are probably really excited about getting into the JET programme. Firstly, congratulations! Your life and experiences in Japan will be something you will remember for a long time. By now you have received information about where in Toyama you are heading and which senior high school you will be teaching at.

There are various types of schools in the prefecture, so here is a quick explanation. Firstly, there are academic schools. These schools have high academic achievements and are well known around the prefecture for that. Many of the students are more silent and studious but are very kind. The next ones are mid-level and vocational schools. These are schools that are more focused on preparing their students for specific careers. These include technical schools as well. Students in these schools are a bit more likely to be engaging with you from the start. Lastly, there are private schools. These are schools with students who didn’t receive very good entrance exam scores. They tend to have a strange stereotype against them, but often the students are also hard-working. These categories are just rough descriptions of what you will encounter. Categories aside, classes differ vastly and so do interests. There will be students who will be interested in English and some who are not, regardless of which school they go to. Encourage them all and don’t take it personally if they tell you bluntly, “I don’t like English.”

When you arrive, you will have a lot of time (about one month) to yourself since it will be summer vacation. This is a good time to explore your school and get grounded. If your predecessor has left lesson plans, books, textbooks etc. I would recommend reading or looking through some of them. Also, talk to your supervisor and teachers and find out what they expect of you and how the classes are. The quicker you set up a system of communication with them, the easier it will be for you.

Summer vacation is also a good time to see what the students have been learning so you can begin to work on your lesson plans. Perhaps your predecessor left you a lot of resources, take advantage of it. Now is also a good time to get to know some of your teachers better. This will help in establishing a good relationship in and outside the classroom, which will ultimately help the students. Perhaps also speak to the teachers who do not teach English. Bringing omiyage will definitely help. Sometimes even a simple ‘Ohayo gozaimasu’ (good morning) and a smile is all that is necessary. This a good time to practice your Japanese, your colleagues will appreciate the effort you made and you get a free Japanese lesson out of it too.

Take time to also visit some of the clubs. Often students will be happy to have you there and some clubs might even take the initiative to invite you to join. This will help you and the students get better acquainted before the hectic school semester starts.

When classes finally begin, you might be nervous about getting started. I would recommend observing and learning from your JTE in class, they will often guide you. If you are unsure, just ask. Remember to check your school’s schedule board daily. You might have a timetable, but it will often change to accommodate teachers (you included) who have to go to business meetings and school events. You don’t want to be told at the last minute that you have a class in 5 minutes. Remember flexibility is key, it will make your work life a lot easier.
Often when you get to the classroom and begin teaching, you will be met with a wall of silence, don’t worry. Japanese students are more of the quietly-paying-attention type of students than the vibrant outspoken type. That being said, if you do happen to have an outspoken student (or two) in your class, interacting with them will encourage other students to speak up more in class. Do not be discouraged, many of them are curious about you and sometimes they will ask you questions about yourself and where you come from. If the questions are a little too personal, you can smile politely and think of a witty reply. Get ready for some “Do you have a boyfriend/ girlfriend?” questions.

Schools often have a lot of events planned throughout the year. There will be English events and activities as well. Your school might have an English Club which you will be asked to lead. There are also the contests that teachers and students will ask for your help on. Always be prepared to help. It is a good idea to attend or even participate in school and non-school events such as athletics day or baseball matches. Try to be proactive and ask teachers about events or the calendar. Sometimes teachers forget to tell you or think you are not interested. Just being at an event will help in adjusting to your new life in Japan.

Try to be as proactive as possible in your new life, it will help you adjust much faster and meet more people. Just remember that every situation is different. (You will hear this many times, make it a mantra.)

See you around!

MoiponeKgatle
Uozu High School ALT

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**Introduction to junior high school life**

The curriculum

Junior high school is the last stage of compulsory education for children in Japan. Unlike high school, students do not choose a school freely but are assigned to one based on where they live. Schools are lead by the principal (ko-cho) and vice-principal (kyoto). Classes are referred to by year (nen) and group (kumi). For example, year 3 class 1 would be called san-nenichi-kumi. All classes have their own homeroom teacher.

Junior high school students take the following subjects (I’ll add the kanji abbreviation that they are usually indicated with on schedules etc.). They are: English (英), Japanese (国, called ‘kokugo’), math (数), social studies (社), science (理), PE (体) (when including health education it’s 体育), fine arts (美), industrial arts (技), home economics (家), and music (音). Besides these, students spend several hours a week in their homerooms for class activities (学級), integrated study (総合), and moral education (道). With four classes every week, English is among the subjects students spend most class hours on.

A school year is divided into three terms: ichigakki (starting in April), nigakki (September), and sangakki (January). Students face many exams throughout the year (generally indicated with -tesuto, -kosa or -chosa), including mid-term (chukan), end-of-term (kimatsu), and academic achievement tests (gakuryoku-chosa/chukyoken).
Third year students take high school entrance exams (*nyushi*) in February or March.

**Clubs**

An important aspect of junior high school life in Japan is club activity. After students finish their end-of-day meetings, they spend the rest of the afternoon at their club. Most of these are sports-related: the baseball team, the football team, tennis, judo, etc., but there is usually also a brass band, a fine arts club and a broadcasting club. Some schools also have an English club. It’s pretty much obligatory for students to join a club.

The clubs train almost every day and regularly compete in regional contests. This schedule goes on relentlessly even during weekends and vacation periods. Summer, in most Western countries have a long vacation period, Japan is no exception. As a result, the children, and the poor teachers that lead them, have close to no free time throughout the year.

Club activity in Japan serves a larger purpose than just getting the students involved in sports or culture. As a matter of fact, it’s more about learning manners, discipline, junior-senior relationships, and creating group mentality. Winning in contests is a thing of pride for the whole school, but the students are taught that as long as they tried hard, losing is ok.

➤ A tip from personal experience: visit clubs regularly. Even if you just stand around and watch, students will be very happy that you take an interest in their extracurricular activities. It will most definitely improve your relationship with them.

The Japanese work environment

One of the first things you may notice is the fact that you get very little instructions on what you should do, especially at times when there are no classes. After a few weeks of nobody telling you what to do, or being regularly left in the staff room by yourself with no one telling you what’s going on, you might start to feel ignored, distrusted and/or useless. Many, if not all, ALTs go through this.

Don’t take it personally. In Japan, new employees at schools and companies alike are generally expected to simply observe and copy the behavior of their experienced colleagues. Crudely put, in Japan you don’t wait for instructions, you follow. Unfortunately, as an ALT you are in a category of your own, and your predecessor is probably long gone, so you have no one to copy or follow. On top of that, your colleagues may not expect you to do anything outside class in the first place, because they think you don’t understand the language and the Japanese way of doing things, and also, because they might see you as a guest who shouldn’t be bothered with tasks not directly related to English class.

Every school is different and so to a certain degree you’ll just have to hang in there and try to find a mode of behavior that works for you. Nevertheless, here are some concrete tips:

➤ If you see your Japanese colleagues suddenly take off, try following them. They’ll tell you if you’re really not welcome. But at least you’re showing them you’re interested in what’s going on. You might end up at a ceremony for students, or at worst, at a meeting in all Japanese.

➤ If you want to keep an organized schedule and avoid surprises, actively seek out your JTEs and don’t wait for them to come to you. For example, I go around all of my JTEs on Monday morning, carrying my schedule to check which classes they want me to attend, and what we are going to do in those classes. You could also ask them about any meetings or events going on that week.
Come up with ideas for class activities in advance, and ask your JTE if you can integrate them in his or her lessons. Avoid becoming a tape recorder and retain your self-respect. You’ll fare better mentally. Leading activities in class will also get you much more useful teaching experience.

Just once a month or even fewer times, stay at school after the students have gone home. You’ll likely find that the atmosphere in the staff room is completely different. Teachers are much more relaxed and will have more time to talk with you, also about stuff that’s not school-related (of course, school-organized parties are also a good opportunity for this).

Useful expressions at work
Although as an ALT you are not expected to speak Japanese (some of your Japanese colleagues might even prefer you speak English), trying it as much as you can with your colleagues will most likely get you some praise and respect. So to end this letter, here are some Japanese language tips:

- Teachers are referred to by their last name followed by sensei. The principal and vice principal are addressed by their title, i.e. kocho-sensei and kyoto-sensei.
- Classes typically start and end with a greeting ceremony (aisatsu), which consists of kiritsu (stand up), ki-o-tsuke (attention), and rei (bow).

Also, try putting these expressions into practice:
- Meeting someone for the first time that day, generally before 10am: Ohayo gozaimasu
- Meeting someone after 10am: O-tsukaresamadesu
- Leaving school: O-sakinishitsureishimasu / O-tsukaresamadeshita
- Leaving school for a work-related trip: Ittekimasu (or, when it’s close to the end of your work day: o-sakinishitsureishimasu)
- As for communicating with students, I suggest you start by trying to improve their “harrooo!” to something more English sounding.

Take the initiative, keep a positive attitude and be aware that cultural differences exist.

Good luck.

Lieuwe Boer

Teaching in Elementary School

Hello! Congratulations on getting passed what was probably one of the most arduous job applications you have done so far. Right about now you are probably getting everything you need to come over and then some. If you are anything like me, you might also be freaking out a bit about actually teaching if you don’t have any experience; and if the last time you looked at an English grammar book was in high school.

I’m here to put some of that anxiety at ease, at least at the elementary school level. Keep in mind as you continue reading that I will try to keep this as general as possible. However, even in our small prefecture there are differences at each school in the way things are run. That said, the pattern itself is usually the same, just execution might
vary. Regardless go in everyday as pumped up as you can because at the end of the day, elementary school kids are just awesome and will become your best little friends if you put out the energy to keep up.

Depending on your area and your contract you may have one elementary school or, based on what I have heard, up to 5 or 6 schools. Your area will also determine whether or not you have a Japanese Teacher of English, aka JTE, at your schools every week. For example, for the Takaoka City BOE schools, you will have a JTE at the school. You may not be teaching with them all the time as they may need to teach other classes at the same time as yours, but they will be there to discuss things. For other parts of the prefecture, I'm not quite sure the setup but I do know that the homeroom teacher will be in every class whether to help quiet the kids down or teach.

Generally you will be following a textbook. I think there is one area that doesn't use a book, and all of the activities are made by the ALT. For the most part though you will be following a textbook. You have 35 hours to fill for the year and Monday schools tend to get the short stick on this. Work with it the best you can. For the first class you will be doing your introduction lesson. Plan something fun for the kids to get really engaged in and want to ask questions. I used a PowerPoint with a lot of pictures, and then played a true/false game with prizes at the end. Leave plenty of time for Q/A and have fun answering all the great questions that come out of these kids' mouths.

The best part of the day, I think, is playing with the kids during recess. You don't have to, but if you feel like you have the energy after the morning classes go hang out with the little guys. I tend to play with the younger classes since I don't teach them. By playing with them in school it makes them less likely to look at me strangely outside of school (three years with these kids and they still won't speak a word outside of school to me). They love to ask personal questions, play games, use you as a jungle gym, etc. You may be at one point teaching the younger classes, so simple stuff is fine. Names, animals, numbers, weather, etc. They'll relearn it all again during official classes from 5th grade.

The big point is just to have fun with them. Be wacky and crazy. I jump around during class, make faces at them, go way over the top with gestures and words. It takes a lot of energy and I usually crash hard on my elementary days, but they tend to be my favorite days of the week.

Good luck with everything! Really don't worry all that much at the beginning. I did and looking back on it, I could have saved myself a lot of stress had I just breathed.

If you want to learn more or have any questions feel free to email me at melillo.alex@gmail.com. I hope your stay in Toyama will be a great one!

All the best,
Alex Melillo
Teaching at a Special Needs School

This was one of my biggest worries before I came here…and I’d never really been trained in Special Needs Education prior to coming here.

My school has elementary, middle AND senior divisions and I see all types of students here. Some are completely wheelchair-bound and are limited to blinking or small mouth movements…Some have some understanding of what is being taught if it is done at a much slower pace…and some are students with minor autism and just need to be in a class with fewer students…Also, I don’t always teach with a JTE, so while Japanese is not strictly necessary, it DOES come in handy.

To date, I don’t know their exact medical conditions. I just ask, “Can they_________?” For example, I ask if they can write or move or walk or talk. Once I understand what they can do, I design an activity for them.

My favorite classes are the Elementary classes. The students are SUPER adorable and seeing my face makes them happy. Who wouldn’t like that? A lot of times, my lessons with the Elementary students are about letting them hear English and less emphasis is placed on getting them to actually learn it.

I sing songs…make a lot of funny faces…bring soft toys and crazy props…joke with the kids…make holiday cards…make slide shows of my trips and talk to them about it….play games like fruit basket. Most of the time, the teachers are there to lend me a lot of support. They are always in the class to give the students the proper attention they need.

That said, it’s not ALWAYS easy. I recently got a student who was bullied severely before joining us. He is extremely hostile, doesn’t take well to my cheerful disposition and I still haven’t found a way to reach out to him. All I can say is that, some things take time, patience and lots of love.

So, yes, Special Needs can be daunting especially for those who’ve had no experience in that area, there’s no one-size fits all solution and situations can differ school to school. BUT, roll with the punches, ask questions and you’ll be surprised by how much you learn from them.

For more info: https://iggyinjapan.wordpress.com/

A Yagnya
Teaching a Special Needs Class

Congratulations! You’ve made it all the way to Toyama, and you’re ready for your first day of school. You have a brand new pair of indoor shoes, and you’re ready to take on the world (or at least some small, rural, Japanese part of it). At school, they hand you your schedule and amongst all the “2-1”s and the “3-3”s, you see “得”. In English, it means “special”, and it’s your class of intellectually, socially or physically disadvantaged students.

I can’t speak to what it’s like to teach at a special needs school, but like many ALTs I have a special needs class at my junior high school, and I teach it once a week. It currently consists of three students (though yours might be much bigger or much smaller, both of which pose some interesting challenges) with nothing in common but being different. Initially, I had a third grader with Down syndrome in the same class as a genius first grader with a penchant for removing clothing during class—and I had absolutely no experience whatsoever in interacting with special needs kids. Suddenly, right out of college, my job included teaching a helpful, interesting and challenging English lesson to a group of students who couldn’t be more different from each other, and it seemed impossible. If (when) you’re faced with the same task, fear not. Here are a few things that I’ve learned about teaching my special needs kids; I hope they’re helpful to you.

Keep it relevant, simple, and fun. Let go of the idea that your students will already be halfway through writing their doctoral thesis on Fitzgerald by the end of the school year. It won’t happen. For many of your special needs students, their lives are already so challenging that they won’t have the mental energy to spare for mastering English, and that’s ok. As their English teacher, you can still make their time worthwhile by teaching them useful, simple, relevant English. Do they know how to talk about themselves? Do they know how to ask for directions? Do they know the English number system well enough to figure out foreign currency? Can they tell the time and say the date? Think of all the linguistic things you struggled with on that trip to Spain five years ago and find a way to incorporate them into a fun English lesson. Don’t worry—you can do it.

Stick to the plan. When I started working with the JET Program, I had a co-teacher who thought a good special needs lesson consisted of random vocabulary review followed by several rousing games of Connect Four. As you might imagine, this wasn’t terribly effective. My students performed so much better when there was a clear connection between one week’s lesson and the next, as well as a clear, vocalized plan for the semester or the unit. For example, I did a unit on family introductions that started with family member vocabulary, then moved on to jobs, birthdays, ages, fruits/animal/sports/colors, then finished with a family member presentation that combined all the vocabulary and grammar that we’d covered. It was fun, cohesive, and just the right amount of challenging for my kids. They knew what we were doing, why we were doing it, and where we were headed—and not a game of Connect Four in sight.

Differentiate, differentiate, differentiate. Your school will tell you a grand total of nothing about your special needs students. You won’t be told about their diagnoses, their home life, their health problems or their hang-ups. That being said, figure it out. No one will tell you, but you still need to know this stuff in preparation for differentiating the pants off these kids. Here are some sage words from my college education professor: “Differentiation isn’t letting a student who finishes early draw a picture on her math test. It’s tailoring your material to individually and fully meet the
needs of each and every one of your kids.” Fully challenging each of your special needs children is going to be tough. They need different things, and they learn in different ways, but it’s worth the effort. Once we got going, my special needs class quickly became one of my favorite classes, and the same thing could absolutely happen to you. Differentiate, learn their behavioral quirks and their interests, and run with the challenge. Your special needs students really are special kids, and they deserve the best you can give them.

Don’t worry, they’ll give you their best in return.

Allison Bradley
Kurobe Junior High School
allison.bradley@outlook.com

Teaching at Multiple Schools

You are a novelty. You have a special talent. You can thank your parents for birthing you in whatever English-speaking country you’re from for that. Thanks, birth parents. Your English abilities may seem trivial anywhere else, but in Japan, it’s kind of a big deal. Also, you’re foreign, which means you’re not Japanese, and that’s different, unique, special, and exotic. Also your base attractiveness goes up by about 25% in Japan, so you’ve got that going for you, which is pretty cool.

So, what will you do with this English ability you have? Probably, you’ll be stretched as thin as possible. People want you to teach their kids! You’re like a beautiful, foreign, English-speaking trophy! Being overworked is a compliment. When I first got to Tateyama Town, I worked at one Junior High School and four Elementary Schools. This year, I teach at seven Elementary Schools. But it’s really not bad, and once you meet your kids, you won’t mind so much.

There are good and bad things about working at a bunch of different schools. The good news is that the kids are adorable and they’ll be excited to see you because they don’t get to see you as much as if you were visiting fewer schools. Another good thing is that you can reuse lessons all across the board and have more time for other things, like working on Junior High School classes or writing reassuring essays for newcomers. Am I doing it right?

There are bad points too, I suppose. Like not being able to see the kids as much and them not understanding that you have over 1200 students and can’t remember all their names. You may feel unable to make strong relationships with the kids or teachers as a result. But, hey! At least the schools aren’t fighting over you anymore like children fighting over a new toy. Because yes, that happens.

The hardest part about working at so many schools is keeping straight what you’ve taught to whom. It’s going to be difficult keeping track of so many schools, so invest in some folders or binders that will allow you to hang onto each lesson plan for each school.
Each district may have its own way of communicating. If you can speak Japanese, you may receive a fax in Japanese that explains the day’s basic plans before you go to a school. Others may leave it up to you to make a lesson, so it’s just a matter of knowing which topic you’ll be doing and creating it from there, showing up to the class and rolling with it. As always, ESID is strong, but remember that in the beginning of the year, you should find a communication and teaching method you are comfortable with. There is nothing wrong with asking the elementary teachers to start the year off by making the lessons, and having you occasionally supplementing fun activities when you can. You’ll have a lot on your plate in the beginning and your being comfortable should be priority.

You may be in a situation where you don’t speak a lot of Japanese, or your teachers don’t speak a lot of English. This can sometimes make communication hard. I recommend a fax or e-mail system in this case; both parties can take the time to look up words they don’t know and carefully word their messages so that lines aren’t crossed. If you think it’s easier for you to just make the lessons yourself, go for it; as long as your ES teachers are cool with that.

Pace yourself. Take your time to think up a lesson you can reuse with any class size and if you need help, ask a teacher you can trust. If you really want to remember all your students’ names, make nametags for your first lesson and have them use them consistently. Enjoy the time you spend with them because you won’t be able to see them often. Get plenty of sleep. And above all, always be genki.

Haley Alt

Teaching Non-Japanese Students

Welcome to Toyama! I wish you all the best during your JET adventure!

Having gone through this packet of different perspectives and different aspects of teaching in Toyama, I am certain that by this point you have come to the understanding that NO two schools in Toyama are the same. This can be refreshing news but it can also lead to further confusion as to how to conduct your job as an ALT in the classroom. The greatest sense of confusion I’ve encountered was walking into a classroom full of foreigners! Not only non-native speakers from Pakistan, India, the Philippines, South Korea, China, Russia and Germany, but also native speakers from Canada, the United States and Australia! With non-Japanese students, all bets are off!

So, what’s the best way to approach this situation? As with most things JET, the answer is creativity! In being creative, one doesn’t approach all foreign students with the same strategy in mind. Instead, as a general guideline, you should be open to them, learn about the circumstances that brought them to Japan, and find out how to best help them improve their English.

Being open and learning about the foreign students at your school can be a tricky situation. Few students actualize what their foreign status means in the same way. Some of my students take active pride in separating themselves from their peers and love referring to their past experiences while other students I’ve met do their best to
assimilate into the class and do not want to be singled out or asked about their culture. I’ve found that the best way to deal with this situation is to first inquire about the student from their homeroom teacher or previous English teachers. With the former, homeroom teachers are well known to invest a lot of time and energy into their students and know the most about their family’s story and English ability. They can give a good indication as to how to work with their students. In addition, when classmates are busy doing individual activities in class, feel free to approach the student and ask non-invasive questions. Be sure to make yourself available as a friend. For some students, this sense of friendship can give them an opportunity to express themselves outside of the Japanese-speaking world.

In addition, as you become better friends with your fellow foreigners, be sure to learn what circumstance brought them to Japan. Once again, it is important to navigate this topic carefully as a few students I’ve met have come here because of death of their main guardian or failed family business ventures. Once again, it is smart to start from the teachers and move in. The activity that best helped me learn about my foreign students was from their journal activities. Our first entry was a self-introduction. Use information given by the student to start conversations and eventual friendships. This leads me to another point: finding out the best way to help these students. More often than not, the foreign students I’ve met in Japan tend to have higher English levels than their Japanese peers. Because of this, the English classroom may seem like a dull and wasted period for them. Instead, pending approval from your JTE, find out whether they are comfortable with you assigning them additional work in class that would challenge them at their appropriate levels. Complex short fiction, contemporary articles from the New Yorker and the Economist followed by questions are a great way to make their mental gears work harder. Also, in my Current Issues class, I weekly assign the foreign students in class to work on research projects that they eventually present in class. This not only keeps them busy, but it also provides an opportunity for their Japanese peers to learn from them.

In addition, some foreign students may not be as skilled in Japanese as they are in English. As a JET studying Japanese, you can use this to create a sense of solidarity. Be sure to encourage each other and consider having the student sign up for the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT). Not only will studying with your student encourage you to study more, other teachers will be grateful to see an increase in the student’s Japanese ability. In addition, should your student be a non-native English speaker or near non-native level, it would be wise to consider what level Eiken (Test in Practical English Proficiency) exam they should consider. Study materials for the Eiken exams make great additional class work if they finish the class assigned work before their peers. Having seen the level-1 Eiken exam, I firmly attest that there is an appropriate level for all foreign students in Japan. I’ve even seen an Australian student struggle to pass the vocabulary section of this exam!

Lastly, keep it fun! Foreign students give an opportunity to bring a whole new perspective into the classroom. Ask them to help explain an English term. Have them help out at an English Club event. Help each other navigate through the confusing and exciting world of Japanese education!

Cullan Riley
Toyama Kokusai Dai Fuzoku
Living in Rural Japan

Congratulations! You will soon be arriving in Toyama-ken, a prefecture bursting with the natural beauty of snow-capped mountains, a plethora of fields swaying with stalks of rice, and—if you’re lucky—a glimpse of Toyama Bay. When I was given my placement to a place I had never heard of, I naturally took to the internet to look up as much information as I could. I was moving my life halfway across the world, after all, and I wanted to know what it was going to be like. I came away slightly disappointed.

Did you know that Uozu-shi is known for three mysterious phenomena? Now you do. There wasn’t much about Uozu online. I felt as though I had learned a few odd facts that are only useful when you’re engaged in a trivia game. Uozu was still a mystery. If you’re having the same problem, don’t worry! Although living in the countryside will likely challenge you—there are still days I struggle—the rewards exceed any amount of challenges you may face. When people come to Japan, they often go to the larger cities. They may pass by the little countryside towns as the Shinkansen propels them to the next stop of their whirlwind tour of Japan, but they never truly see it. You’re extremely lucky in that aspect. You get to experience what life is like away from the tourist destinations.

As mentioned before, Toyama has an abundance of natural beauty. You can step outside of your door and Bam! Mountains. Where I come from, most of the natural beauty is upstate and a long drive from my hometown. There’s certainly no mountains. Living so close to the mountains and the sea is something that I’m incredibly thankful for. It’s not obscured by high-rises and the bustle of a city. Having this right outside your door is wonderful.

Living in the inaka, or countryside, is very safe. My neighbors often leave their doors unlocked. If you lose something, someone will track you down because you’re so visible. People will know you as one of the few, or only, foreigners living in your town. As you bumble through your Japanese they will bumble through the English they know. People want to get to know you. A friendly attitude is something you want to have, even when you’re having a tough day. Sometimes those little interactions can perk you right up. Of course, being a foreigner in the inaka has its downsides. People may stare at you. A lot. You can usually dispel this with a wave and a greeting, so brush up on your hellos. Sometimes, even a greeting doesn’t work, but don’t let it get you down. There will always be people who are having a bad day and want to bring you down.

Although Uozu may be bigger than several of the smaller towns in Toyama-ken, it still lacks some things that you may be used to. Don’t worry! You’ll be able to walk or bike to the local train station if you don’t have a car. Toyama and Takaoka are probably your best bets, depending on which side of the prefecture you’re on.

When I was placed in Uozu-shi three years ago, I never realized that it would charm me the way it has. I was adamant that I was only going to stay for one year. Connecting with the Japanese and Toyama foreigner community helped me fall in love with the inaka life. Don’t hesitate to connect with the people around you as they can make something that may be scary (especially if this is your first time living in the country), truly wonderful.

Amanda Fink
Food in Japan

Q: Where is your favorite place to eat out?

Abbi: Sakura Sushi in the Nomura area of Takaoka has a Toyama Sushi Platter that is all fresh caught local fish and it is to die for. It’s run by a legit sushi master, his wife and his apprentice, and I love their homemade miso. However not for the faint of heart, the first time I went my miso had the fish head floating in it. It’s a great way to try a little bit of everything that Toyama is famous for. I highly recommend it.

Hiro: I’m a fan of variety and I’m always searching for new favorites (the best this... the local favorites that...). But one place I find myself going back to most often is a nice ramen shop called Tsubaki. The portions are nice, the broth and noodles are yummy, and the *chashu* is one of the best I’ve found. If you find yourself in Tonami on the 156 near the tulip park, you could do worse than check it out.

Q: Where do you buy your food?

Abbi: Generally I do most of my shopping at AEON because the produce is generally really good and really cheap. When I’m looking for foreign food I like to browse through Kaldi on a regular basis, there are always new imports to try. Yamaya is great for imported alcohol. There is a Brazilian place in Takaoka where you can get your cilantro and lime fix. I shop online for some things too. The best place to get meat is definitely from The Meat Guy, if you have the freezer room for it, it’s a lot cheaper than shopping at the grocery store. It is also one of the only places you can get feta. I also buy my peanut butter from iherb instead of from an import store, it’s always cheaper and you get a lot more. iherb is great if you’re looking for organic, gluten free, or vegan things as well.

Hiro: Good answer! Spot on. If you have a list with hard to find foods, there’s a few more places you could check out. Try the department store basements (like Daiwa) as they often have imported food. There’s also a restaurant supply store called Marushin in Takaoka that has a lot of hard to find stuff in large/ XL sizes. Also, you never know where you might randomly find some treasure. Even Daiso sometimes has rare imported snacks and sauces for super cheap. And don’t despair about the Japanese version of some things. Although, for example, typical Japanese bacon is more like ham in flavor, you can find locally made artisan versions of food that are just fine for when you get cravings. Tonami has a shop that makes fantastic thick cut bacon and English style breakfast sausages, that are pretty darn close in taste (but pricey). The internet has made it pretty easy to get fantastic stuff from overseas. I order from iherb too, once a month. Pro-tip: don’t spend more than 16500¥ per order on anything imported from those companies or you get slapped with a 3000¥ customs fee, C.O.D. Took me three big orders to figure that one out. Oh! Farmer's markets and "michi no eki"s have wonderful produce, often for super cheap.

Q: What about kitchen gadgets?

Abbi: Not going to lie, I had a bunch of my favorite kitchen gadgets (garlic press, lime juicer, set of microplanes) sent from home because even at the kitchen stores I’ve been too there was no sign of them. There is a really awesome new kitchen store that opened up at the mall in Kanazawa (Forus). It is worth the trip as they have almost anything you could want for your kitchen, even some foreign brands. As for appliances, recycle
shops are a good way to go, but when in doubt, Amazon.co.jp should have most anything you can’t find in stores. I personally bought my oven at a recycle shop, my rice cooker at Musashi, and then I ordered my blender, slow cooker and food processor on Amazon.

Hiro: Yeah! That shop at Forus is really good! For just getting started, Daiso has a ton of cheap utensils. But you get what you pay for, so for important things, you might want to do it right. There’s a nice shop called Muji at Favore and Aeon malls that has some nice stuff too. Also Nittori in Tonami, Takaoka, and Toyama. Think small Japanese Ikeas. Before dropping too much cash on big appliances, see if your board of education will help pay for things. I’ve had to replace a fridge and kerosene heater. My price? Free.99.

Q: What is the one thing you couldn’t live without in your kitchen?

Abbi: Gadget? My set of knives that I brought to Japan from America. It’s a simple Rachel Ray set with a paring knife, serrated knife and chef knife, but I never leave home without it. Ask the people whose apartments I cook at, I always show up with them in tow. Food? Quick, easy comfort food that doesn’t go bad so you can stock up on it. I always have boxes of Annie’s Mac in Cheese in my pantry for those days where I’m sick or homesick and I don’t want to do anything or I’m about to go on a trip so I don’t want to buy perishable things. I usually always doctor it up with some frozen bags of vegetables or sun dried tomatoes and bacon, but just the easiness of it is what I find most comforting.

Hiro: Good knife and a heavy pot and pan. Silicone spatula. Mmmm... Annie's sounds good right now.

Q: If you could give one piece of advice to the incoming ALTs?

Abbi: Be adventurous, not picky. This prefecture is a haven for food lovers. We have Brazilian (Takaoka), Italian (Tonami), French (Takaoka), Indian (Toyama, Takaoka), pizza (Kurobe), burgers (Toyama), and almost anything else you can think of. Ask around, explore, and if no one knows about a restaurant, just try it. Most chefs in the area are alumni of my school, you won’t be disappointed.

Hiro: My recommendation to anybody moving to any new place is to first find an independent place with good food, made from scratch and with love, and with down to earth staff that show genuine interest in getting to know you. Then go there as often as reasonably possible until they know you by name. After that you can go less and less. But that can be your new home base and they will take care of you. From there you can learn a lot about the local area. Of course, it could be any kind of establishment. Also, ask your neighbors, local JETs, fellow teachers, and finally as a last straw, use the Toyama jet community Facebook page for FAQs. Almost all the information you need is out there, you just have to ask! Feel free to contact me or Abbi, and Enjoy!

About the contributors:
Abigail Rose Clark: Born and raised in New England, and having spent her fair share of time on the hard streets of Virginia, Abbi is known for many things... but bad food is not one of them.
Hiroyoshi Murasaki: Born and raised in the city of Miami, where the weather is hot... and so are the people. Hiro wonders how far back into the process one has to go to truly cook something from scratch.
Vegetarian and Vegan ALTs
Dear vegan/pescetarian/ovo-lacto vegetarian,

Take a moment to think about your favorite vegetarian food from back home. Was it the faux meatballs in the freezer section? Was it the beautifully spiced Ethiopian food from the local restaurant? Was it a particular brand of almond milk? How about that vegan salted caramel chocolate bar? All of the above? Great. Now raise your hand and wave them goodbye, because you won’t be seeing them for a good long while. Being vegetarian in Japan is all about going back to the basics—learning to work within what’s available and saying “Sayounara” to many of the veg-friendly items you might be used to. Many Japanese people have an unrealistic idea of what it means to be vegetarian (if they have any idea at all), and veganism doesn’t even register as a possibility. It might take some time before you’re really comfortable as a vegetarian in Japan, but you’ll get there eventually. Here are some of the veg-related issues that will almost certainly pop up during your time in Toyama:

My school’s lunch isn’t vegetarian. At all.
If you’re at senior high school, you can bring whatever you want for lunch. If you work at elementary schools or junior high schools, however, your students and coworkers will all be eating lunch provided by the school. Kyuushoku (school lunch) will almost always contain some sort of meat or fish and probably won’t satisfy your dietary guidelines. Fear not—it’s ok to opt out and bring your own lunch instead. Keep in mind that the children are watching everything you do, so bringing nothing but a bag of chips and a chocolate bar into the lunchroom probably isn’t the best idea.

My school invited me to an enkai. A.) What is that? B.) Can I eat it?
An enkai is a big party where the whole staff gets together to drink until they fall over and eat until they’re ready to burst. Usually, there will be a set price that covers all-you-can-drink alcoholic beverages and a pre-arranged menu that will be brought to you throughout the night. This menu will invariably include huge platters of meat or fish. Yum! Once I know for sure that I’m both available and interested, I ask my school if the venue can arrange a separate menu for me. If the answer is no, it’s perfectly alright to say “Thanks, but no thanks.” Do keep in mind, though, that they’ll probably stop inviting you if you say no often enough.

This looks vegetarian…it’s probably fine, right?
Wrong. Japanese restaurants are notorious for leaving ingredients, particularly things that they view as flavoring ingredients (bacon, fish broth, chicken bouillon) rather than main ingredients, out of the menu description. The only way to make sure something isn’t going to include surprise bacon or come out topped with fish flakes is to ask your waiter. If you’re not sure how to ask, here are some useful phrases:

Is there any meat or seafood in (~)?

(-)に肉とシーフードは入っていますか。
(-)niniku to shiifuudo wa haitte imasuka?

Can you make this without X?

これをXぬきでできますか。
Kore o X nuki de dekimasuka?

I can’t read Japanese but I want to buy these chips. Help!
Navigating a Japanese ingredient list can be tough even if you’re fluent. The good news is that you’ll probably start to recognize the meat-related kanji within a few trips to the grocery store. Japan loves putting sneaky animal products in things, so don’t be
surprised if those potato chips you’re eyeing have chicken powder in them. If you don’t know how to read Japanese, I would recommend studying katakana so you can identify items like gelatin. There are lots of online guides you can use that will walk you through the relevant kanji, but here are a few radicals (parts of kanji) that you can look out for. If you see any of these things in the ingredients list, you know it’s not for you.

肉 にく meat
鳥 とり bird (in terms of food, usually chicken)
豚 ぶた pig (pork)
魚 さかな fish
介 かい denotes some kind of shellfish
乳 にゅう milk product
卵/玉子 たまご egg

Any veg restaurants out there?
One of the things I miss most about 100% vegetarian restaurants is being able to order anything that appeals to me rather than the one or two lackluster choices you’d normally find. You won’t find many vegetarian restaurants in Japan, but there is actually a small subculture of Japanese people who choose a vegetarian diet because they believe it’s better for their health. I know of two restaurants in Toyama City that cater to people with this mentality—NollaCafé and SOL. NollaCafé is a bit outside of the city center, but the owners are really nice and they have two restaurant cats who might pay your table a visit if you’re lucky. SOL is a bit closer to downtown Toyama and definitely worth a try.

The bottom line:
Being a foreign person in Japan is going to present a lot of challenges, and being vegetarian is no more and no less difficult to navigate than any of the others. I’ve found that my schools are usually happy to accommodate my needs as long as I’m considerate and understanding, and I’ve found several local restaurants that have some lovely vegetarian options. You might have to do without some of your favorite vegetarian comforts, but if you keep an open mind you might find something you love even more! If you have any further questions, need someone to help you figure out a Japanese grocery store, or simply want a vegetarian cooking buddy, feel free to send me an email! I’m happy to help.

Allison Bradley

JETs of African Descent

Welcome to Toyama JET!
If you’re someone of African descent, you probably have some specific questions about life in Japan. I know I did: Are there any other black people in Toyama? What assumptions might people make about me? Is racism going to be an issue? And of course, you may also be curious about the availability of hair products and barber shops, since yes, their hair is different from ours!

The answer to the first question is yes! Black members of Toyama JET come from
North America, South Africa and the Caribbean, so you won’t be the only one. On the question of racism and social attitudes, I will say that for the most part, in my experience, I haven’t had any big issues. The vast majority of adults I interact with treat me as they do most foreigners, with all the usual curiosity and non-malicious othering that just comes with the territory of being a gaijin. I can’t speak for all black JETs, but overall, I wouldn’t worry too much about outright discrimination or racism.

Which isn’t to say there are no irritations at all. You will definitely get stares around town. There are other little things, like people assuming that I’m a great basketball player. And I am often told that I resemble a wide variety of totally different-looking black men, from Barack Obama to the half-Japanese African-American enka singer Jero, to Usain Bolt. I don’t really understand why people feel the need to point this out to me so much (let alone how they see some of these resemblances), but it happens a decent amount. Whenever I show a picture in class that happens to have a black man in it, I can always depend on the calls of, “look, it’s Simon-sensei!” to follow. It’s not the end of the world, but it can be annoying after the first dozen times.

And speaking of classes, there is no small amount of curiosity in children about us, especially our appearance. This is especially true of younger children. You will hear expressions of fascination about the color of your skin, and kids will absolutely attempt to touch your hair. Again, speaking from my own experience, I can’t think of more than one or two times when a child said something really out of line, but I have heard a story here or there of ALTs being asked by younger children whether their skin color “comes off” and other offensive remarks. The thing to keep in mind is that they are children, and most of them have never encountered people who look like us, so of course there will be some ignorance. A big part of our job is to dispel that ignorance and teach cross-cultural understanding, so as a JET of African descent, you have an excellent opportunity to promote that understanding on a personal basis with your students!

Finally, on the issue of hair care, I’m afraid it is pretty hard to find hair products for Afro-textured hair. You’ll probably need to order them online or have family send them to you. In bigger cities, you may be able to find them in an import store, but the pickings are pretty slim in Toyama. I’m not as knowledgeable about hair salons and barber shops, since I always just cut my own hair at home, but I imagine that Japanese barbers aren’t very familiar with Afro hair, so that’s something to keep in mind.

Anyway, I hope I was able to answer some of your questions, and I look forward to meeting you when you get here! If you want to talk or have any other questions, feel free to send me an email! See you soon!

Simon Robinson
Simonrobinson42@gmail.com

The Asian JET

Congratulations and welcome!

Toyama is a great place with wonderful people. I remember being very nervous and excited to learn about my new home, and living here has been a continuous opportunity to learn. As a JET of Asian descent there will be things you experience differently from your fellow participants. For me as an incoming half-Japanese JET, it was weird to suddenly not be a visible minority and have everyone around me be able to say my last name.
As an Asian JET you may blend in with the crowd, taking away a lot of the daily stress of being stared at or talked about. This results in new meetings and situations that can range from being hilarious to awkward. I have made students scream when they first heard me speak English (not realizing I was the ALT) and confused people when I told them I’m from Canada or when I ask them to repeat what they said more slowly. Once, the lady who takes tickets at the train station near my school told me I didn’t need to go to school that day because there were no classes. It turns out she thought I was a student, and now it’s like we have an inside joke whenever we see each other. Personally, I have found these interactions to be generally positive and usually result in laughter.

As an Asian JET, your presence challenges preconceptions about what it means to be from a certain country. It can take some maneuvering to explain your background and the relationship between ethnicity, culture, and nationality. You’ll get a lot of questions like “Are you ~?” “Why do you / don’t you speak ~?”. Generally I have found that people express curiosity and want to learn more, and I’ve had a lot of positive conversations come out of questions like these. I’m a second generation Canadian, and I find people are fairly knowledgeable about what that means and like to talk about it and ask me questions about how I grew up. One teacher earnestly told me “You have two hearts, one in Canada, one in Japan”. It’s an opportunity to provide your students (and others) with a new perspective and learn more about yourself and how you identify. That being said, remember that you never owe anyone an explanation about who you are unless you want to share. Learn your own boundaries and don’t be afraid to shut down conversations you’re not cool with.

It’s important to remember that fitting in physically does not mean you feel like you fit in. It may be frustrating to have your differences go unrecognized. It can be something simple like people being less interested in talking to you, to something more complicated, such as having your potential for culture shock underestimated. API (Asian Pacific Islander) AJET is a National AJET special interest group that operates a Facebook page and publication and organizes meet-ups. I am a Block 5 (aka your!) representative for this group. Please contact me if you have any questions whether they be related to API or anything else. Best of luck with preparations and I can’t wait to meet you!

Melody Tsukahara
melody.tsu@gmail.com

The Asian JET

So, Asia is big. This means, there are many types of racially diverse Asians everywhere. Chinese, Malay, Indian, Javanese, Pilipino, Korean, Japanese…the list could go on. I’ll give a brief intro to what I am. I’m a Singaporean Indian girl with brown skin, black hair and brown eyes. I’m technically South-East Asian…but apparently Indians are East-Asian, so I guess, that’s what I look like. Whatever.

Before coming here, I heard a lot of opinions of being a foreigner in Japan. There are many, many YouTube videos and blogs out there talking about this. There are people
who say they attract a lot of attention. There are people who say they blend in completely. I'm just gonna add on to the pile.

When I meet people for the first time, I often get asked if I'm from India or Bangladesh or Pakistan. People form impressions of who I am before I even open my mouth and an English teacher from Singapore is not one of them. Once I DO explain though, the people here are very inquisitive. Where is Singapore, what's there to see, what's life like...I keep a bunch of “about Singapore” facts at the top of my head to entertain people on these occasions.

The thing that shocks most people here is the fact that I speak Japanese. Sometimes, I just introduce myself...and I'm told that my Japanese is REALLY good. Which it isn't. But a little bit of Japanese goes a LONG way.

Generally though, I don't turn any heads. Since day one, people have never really stared at me...and I feel quite comfortable. It's all very normal. I'm obviously a foreigner...but I also don't stand out very much. People recognize me very easily though (Cuz duh...few people look like me around here). The station masters, shop assistants, Starbucks people....after seeing me once, they recognize me. And they're super, super friendly.

To conclude, nationality and skin colour matter in how people view foreigners here. But, friendly communication certainly helps in clearing misconceptions or stereotypes that people hold...and if you’re anything like me, you’ll succeed in living a blissfully peaceful, normal, everyday life.

For more info: [https://iggyinjapan.wordpress.com/](https://iggyinjapan.wordpress.com/)

A Yagnya

**The JET from Developing Countries**

Within Toyama’s JET community, those from developing countries are amongst the least represented. One developing country might have a maximum of three participants, so you might be the first person from your country that the local people might ever get to see.

This means that you might be bombarded with a lot of questions about your country. Do not be surprised if people have never heard about your country before, or may have heard about it but are clueless about things like its location and culture. If you are of African descent, most people will automatically associate your country with the African continent.

However, bear in mind that not everyone will be clueless about you. I have come across quite a number of Japanese who are keen on cultures and will know a lot about your country. Be prepared to answer questions about plants, mountains, birds, constellations, sightseeing spots and other nature-related things as most Japanese are nature lovers.
Many will also ask if you have the four seasons. Your colleagues will likely be worried about you in winter if it does not snow in your country, even if it is not your first winter experience. Japanese also tend to be interested in food, like what do you eat or how do you prepare the same thing that they eat. I emphasize the need to know your country well. Do not just take it for granted that you know your country but do some research as Japanese like specifics.

Some people however, would have learned about your country through the media (which unfortunately can be very sensational) and have developed a stereotypical view based on what they would have perceived as facts. So, if the media portray your country in a bad light, you might be asked uncomfortable questions related to things that you are clueless about. Even recently, there was a “fun program” on a Japanese television station and weird things were said just for laughs (which have no proof) which unfortunately, the public has no choice but to believe because they could see it for themselves on the television. The next day I was asked about them and I myself was shocked because it was news for me too. I felt like a Japanese hearing about something foreign.

In light of all of the above, it is very easy to get discouraged, but just stop for a while and think, why am I here? Part of our responsibility is to promote international awareness and so we should seize the moment to educate and to enlighten people. There are often talks/forums at international exchange centers such as the third floor of the CIC building in Toyama, go there and talk about your country. Go to chat-rooms.

November is culture month in Japan. Why not participate in the international festival and do a booth or share your country’s food? There are unlimited opportunities to display your country. You do not have to feel isolated and sorry for yourself. It is a rich opportunity to be your country’s ambassador. At school, do lessons about your culture to let students and teachers know who you are and where you are from. I have always found this rewarding and now I have students who have done projects about food and reggae music. Some of them cannot wait to start working to travel to Jamaica!

As a JET from a developing country, not only do you get a chance to shed light about your culture, but you can have firsthand experience of life in a developed country. There is so much that you can learn that you can try to implement in your home countries. For example, it will not take long before you figure out that there is certainly no comparison when it comes to things like punctuality. Everything seems to function on time so if you are late you will definitely miss out as nobody will wait for you. Another shocker for me was to experience Japan’s friendly customer service. People here seem to recognize your presence in an extraordinary way, the minute you step into their establishment. Sometimes though I wonder, if it is for the excellent customer service that it boasts, why the prices of goods as services appear to be so expensive. However, I have learnt not to convert to my local currency while shopping so I am gradually getting over it.

While being a JET from a developing country might seem like hard work, it can be incredibly rewarding. In addition to teaching English, you also have the opportunity to introduce your culture to the local people from a very intimate viewpoint. Doing so will not only increase their cultural-awareness, but it will leave you feeling satisfied and enriched.

Venesa Tomlin
Venesatomlin_83@yahoo.com
Coming to Japan with Relationships

First and foremost, congratulations on becoming a JET and congratulations on being placed in the best prefecture in Japan: Toyama. You will soon find out that this place is as wonderful as it is gorgeous and that it will no doubt hold many future adventures for you. Luckily, you will be able to experience that adventure and excitement with your partner and that is something to be celebrated. So, triple congratulations! Congrats for making it into the JET program, congrats for being placed in Awesome-Toyama (copyright still pending), and congrats on being able to experience all of this with your significant other.

If you are asking yourself, “Who is this dude and why does he feel qualified to tell me how awesome life is going to be in Toyama with my S.O.,” which I get a lot believe it or not, allow me ease your mind. I was married shortly before coming to Japan to my girlfriend of four years (at the time). The first year of our marriage was spent in a new country, completely isolated in a small country town, living on our own and relying completely on one another as our combined Japanese skill was akin to a trained monkey. Now, I have nothing against trained monkeys, they have to make a living too, but needless to say we got our trial-by-fire first year of marriage.

And it was awesome. It continues to be awesome. EVERYTHING IS AWESOME.

First things first, prepare yourself for questions about your relationship. As much as Japanese people are delighted and interested by foreigners and the differences/similarities of our lifestyles, they are doubly interested in our relationships. Sometimes, this can feel intrusive, and if it ever is don’t hesitate to say so; however, for the most part I have felt it to be harmless curiosity (with a hint of gossip-fuel).

“When did you meet?” “What’s your SO like?” “How old is your SO?” “Does your SO like sushi?” “Are you married?” “Why/Why not?” “When will you get married?” “How many children do you have?” “Do you say ‘I love you?’ EEEHHHH???” “Why don’t you have a baby yet?”

Oh, yes. That is not an exaggeration. If I had a dollar for every time I was asked why Aly was not yet pregnant, I would have たくさんドラル (Many Dollars). And the questions don’t stop there. They just don’t stop. But at least they get repeated, so there’s that. At the end of the day, try to keep in mind that this is born of a genuine interest in you. Students, coworkers, acquaintances, random people on the street, your taxi driver, circus clowns, that one guy who knows a modicum of English and wants you to be his test subject will all take their opportunity to ask you questions. Just remember that you reserve the right to your own privacy and personal information. Be as open or as private as YOU ARE COMFORTABLE WITH. That’s what is most important.

Aside from what to expect from the natives, I am sure you already know that the importance of keeping the relationship healthy and happy while you are here. This, of course, will be dictated by the groove you and your partner have already set in your lives. So, it wouldn’t be appropriate for me to give you any more advice on that other than how it was for my wife and I.
I arrived a full month before my wife. This was suggested by JET coordinators back in Los Angeles, but we both found it unnecessary after the fact. Had we come at the same time, we both would have had a better take on the situation from the get-go, but that is hindsight for you. If this does happen to be your situation then luckily technology is on your side. In all likelihood, one of the first things you will do is acquire a cell phone. There are a multitude of apps available to help you stay connected: Whatsapp, Viber, LINE, Bobsled and Skype are hugely popular. I have found Viber, LINE and Skype to be infinitely helpful, but Viber is more American-friendly, it seems. LINE is a must-have in Japan, but it can be difficult to get used to at first– sensory overload.

Communication is critical; you are no doubt going to miss one another, so do everything you can to stay connected during this time. If you are in the countryside like us, it becomes even more vital as going home to an empty apartment/house after a long day is a bummer. Do everything you can to make it NOT a bummer! Create opportunities that are the antithesis of a bummer. Have Skype dates planned. Cook dinner “together.” Stay happy and stay healthy!

Once your partner arrives, staying busy is going to be equally important. Chances are your S.O. will not be working on the JET Program and no one wants to be sitting at home staring at the wall all day

…unless you do, which is cool too...

Luckily, there are a ton of teaching opportunities available for non-JETs in the area. These range from YMCA teaching jobs to local community centers to private lessons to other bonafide English teaching programs akin to JET. My wife was idle for a matter of scant days before she found her first job. The key is being proactive and looking for them. She woke up one morning intent to find a job and did just that. In our situation, Aly found employment at the YMCA in Toyama and, before we had a vehicle, took the train into Toyama city to work. It wasn’t long before that job branched into private lessons through networking, and she even managed to get a job with a local community center helping with an after-school program. There are also eikaiwa classes that need to be taught as well. Luckily, being a foreigner in Toyama is a commodity and jobs are available as long as you and your S.O. are proactive. Also, if your partner is proficient in Japanese, there are even more avenues to pursue in acquiring employment. Don’t fret, something will come up.

If you and your partner are in different prefectures, keep reading. If not, skip this paragraph. Personally, I don’t have any experiential knowledge here. Just keep in mind that you are in the same time zone and there are ways to see one another as much as possible. At the very least it is much more convenient than being in different countries. Overnight buses, day buses, express trains and now the Shinkansen are available to you. If you want to move to where your partner is, you must be married and will have to contact your BOE and CLAIR for further information on that process.

As a JET coming with a relationship, you already have the guarantee of experiencing something new and exciting with someone you care about. I can’t stress enough how important taking advantage of that is. Toyama is gorgeous. Really, it is stupid good looking. We have mountains, beaches, hills, temples, shrines, waterfalls, ziplines, and all things awesome. Go out and see it. Every season has something different to offer and it is worth going out and finding out what exactly that is. Honestly, just getting out and taking a walk, getting lost in your neighborhood and desperately trying to find your way home is one of mine and my wife’s favorite past times. With the
new Hokuriku Shinkansen up and running, exploration is no longer limited to day trips around Toyama, but day trips around Japan.

Make friends! Your relationship deserves relationships! Chances are your first new friendships will be with fellow JETs; take advantage of that and form lasting relationships with people from a myriad of different countries, cultures and experiences. It will make your time here so much more fruitful. Also, later on in life you will have your necessary excuses to pack up and go to another country because you have buddies there. You have to play the long game!

Perhaps the most important piece of advice I can give is that Japan should not be seen as a problem that needs to be conquered in order for your relationship to flourish. If you’re reading this, your relationship has obviously endured to this point and Japan should be a binding and bonding experience from which it can grow even stronger. For many, this is a once in a lifetime experience. For me, one of the greatest parts of that experience has been living it with the person I love. My wife and I spend every day together, tell each other about our days, funny anecdotes, and situations that had us frustrated beyond belief, but at the end of the day we have one another. Keep hobbies and allow yourselves to have “you” time if that’s what is needed, but don’t lose sight of how awesomely-radical your situation has just become.

Congratulations again on getting into the JET program. It has been nothing but a positive experience for me and I hope from the bottom of my heart that it will be the same for you. Get stoked and I will see you soon.

- Jeff Newby
- jnewbycs@sub@gmail.com

**Disclaimer: Contrary to his many drunken exclamations to the opposite, Jeff Newby is not a marriage counselor and has been known to overuse the word “awesome” as he does not own a thesaurus.

**JETs with Families**

Hello,
First I would like to congratulate you on being accepted into the JET program and being placed in Toyama.

It is a wonderful prefecture and I have had a wonderful five years here with my family, my wife Lisa, and our two sons Darcy (now 9) and Bryn (now 7). We live in Inami in Nanto city. I am guessing if you are reading this you are bringing your family with you.

I would like to start by pointing out that there are, in effect, two types on families in Japan – married, and unmarried.

If you are unmarried and your partner is coming with you as a non-JET participant much of the information below does not apply to you as Japan does not recognize partnerships which are not legally documented as a marriage. Thus your partner is seen as a separate individual who needs to get their own visa, etc.

If you are married the rules are very different. Anyone who comes to Japan on a
dependent visa is deemed to have the same rights as the family of a Japanese citizen. They receive health care through your health care provider, any entitlements provided to families will also be available (for example child care rebate and child subsidy) and your children will be able to attend the local school (though there is no requirement to provide education for children over the age of 15).

One of the first things you should do is organize for your family to be registered (the system has changed so I am not 100% sure what this means), your school and supervisor should be able to assist with this. Once your family is registered a number of automatic steps should occur, your family should be provided with health care (including a card each) and any benefits should be organized.

Organizing work for your husband or wife is also simple. They will need to have their visa changed (this is done at the immigration center at Toyama airport) and will need to be recorded at your town hall. Once this is done your spouse is entitled to work for up to 20 hours per week on their dependent visa.

For your children if they are 6 on the 1st of April they are eligible to go to school. This is largely free, though you will need to pay for school lunch. Before the age of 6 they can go to youchien (privately run, they cost more, and you will pay for care outside normal hours (8-3 during school terms). Or hoikuen (public day care which operates all year round). I suggest you have a look at your local ones and decide which one you prefer (we went youchien as they had fences between them and the main road (the local hoikuen did not).

A Personal perspective

For us there have been 999 good things for every bad thing we have experienced. Our family has been accepted without issue into our local community and we have experienced almost no discrimination. There are strange things which take some getting used to but that is all part of the experience. My suggestion is flow with it and if you are unsure ask someone you trust in a similar situation. For us we have a couple of close friends with young children and when things get confusing we ask them - things then usually begin to make sense.

I really hope you enjoy your stay here with your family.

Kieran Murphy
Inami Junior high school

Japan for Religious JETs

Hello new JETs!

First off, welcome to Toyama! You’re on your way to a wonderful prefecture in the countryside of Japan. Despite the title, I'm hoping everyone can take something from this letter whether you have a religion, are looking for one, or are just wondering what your new life in Japan is going to be like.
Though many Japanese people are not religious, Japan does offer a lot of opportunities to the spiritual. Shinto and Buddhism are the major religions of Japan, with temples and shrines spread all over the country. Many of the festivals, activities, and even sports you’ll participate in have religious roots. I encourage you to take part in as many of these activities as you can so that you can experience both modern and old Japan. That’s part of why you’re coming here, right? As you experience Japanese culture, you should never be ashamed or afraid to tell people about your own faith and beliefs. Your faith and background are a part of who you are. One of the great things I’ve experienced in Japan is peoples’ respect for foreign cultures and religions. Honor that part of yourself, and share it with others if you are comfortable doing so. Your faith also opens up opportunities in teaching. As ALTs and CIRs, part of our job is cultural exchange – as much of a buzz phrase as that is at Tokyo Orientation (you’ll see what I mean) – it is important. The incredible thing about religion is that regardless of personal beliefs, mutual respect opens up so many opportunities for learning and friendship.

Likewise, no matter what your religion, faith, or creed is, your beliefs can be a huge support to you in Japan. As wonderful as this job is, there are hard times ahead. There will be days of culture shock, homesickness, doubts, frustration, and downright depression. I’m not trying to scare you (because you are about to have some of the most amazing experiences and fun times of your life), but everyone will face hard times, however brief, at some point. When those times come you may not know who to talk to or where to go about it. I have a couple of recommendations. First, anyone in the JET Program can always contact the JET Peer Advisor Line (050-5534-5566). This is an excellent resource where you can call anytime just to talk to someone about whatever you’re going through. It’s confidential, it’s personal, and it helps.

My second recommendation is using your religion as a means of support. Remember that in times of stress or difficulties, your beliefs can become your foundation and support. Whether you are comfortable connecting to a local church, friends and other JETs, or just want to pray on your own, all of these support systems can help you in the hard times and they can make the good times even better. If you do worship regularly, there are a variety of churches in Toyama that you can reach out to (check out the Toyama JET website - www.toyamajets.net/ - for a complete listing).

Personally, I was able to find a branch of my church here and it has been a huge blessing for me. It’s really helped me to branch out in the Toyama community, and the members of my church have become wonderful friends. Ultimately you should do whatever you are comfortable with. Find a local church, talk with other ALTs and find friends who share your beliefs, keep in touch with friends and family back home, or just practice on your own. Whatever you decide to do, you can find religious support here.

I’ll admit being a religious JET can have its challenges, but it’s going to be an incredible experience for you in the end. In the best of times, enjoy life to the fullest. Honor your faith and who you are, and I promise, you will have a better experience here in Japan. In the hardest times, remember your faith, remember your beliefs, and most importantly, remember that you are never alone.

Best wishes,
Catherine Danley
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Being Tall in Japan

If you are reading this, you are either a tall person in Japan or an average/short person who is concerned for your tall friend. If you are in the latter, I commend your thoughtfulness. I would also like to say that a little adjusting can make life more comfortable for taller folks in Japan. I am 190 cm (or almost 6’3”) and have learned how to deal with being tall in Japan and am happy to pass on some of my knowledge.

Japan is a country of people that are generally shorter than what many are accustomed to back home. The average Japanese male is 172 cm (5’7.5”) and the average Japanese female is 158 cm (5’2”). “This country isn’t built for me,” is a thought I often have when I run into uncomfortable situations involving my size. In other words, this guide will be less of a ‘how to’ and more of a ‘watch out for’. You can’t really make this country larger. However, I will try my best to tell you how I get around such things.

1. Restaurants with traditional Japanese seating at low tables are your enemy. You will have to learn to position your legs in any dinner situation that calls for it. After sitting legs-crossed for so long, you will probably want to change positions. You will eventually get the hang of shoving your feet under the table or maneuvering them into better positions without knocking the table. Also, if you can, avoid the seat by the wall at an enkai. There just is not enough space for you to sit properly and it will just be uncomfortable for you.

2. Learn to duck. The doors in my apartment are just small enough that I hit my head on them if I’m not careful. It has happened a few too many times where I have hit or scraped my head because I wasn’t aware of my body. You might run into this situation in your apartment, someone else’s apartment, in a capsule hotel or anywhere really. Just be aware of your height and the ceiling height of wherever you are.

3. Your height is a way to earn cool points among your vertically-challenged students, especially in elementary and junior high. I cannot count the times where I stuck out my hand and let little kids jump to high five me. I’ve picked up students so they can see what being almost two meters tall can be like. I’ve been asked how I got so tall. I’ve touched the ceiling just to impress students. It earns you cool points all the time, so soak it up whenever you can.

4. Buying clothes might suck. Being tall tends to mean that you have long limbs. This can make buying long-sleeve shirts, jeans and slacks difficult. But fear not. There are some great places to buy long-sleeves, jeans and slacks. Besides Toyama’s few big and tall stores, places like UNIQLO have those taller sizes both in store and online for the same price as a regular shirt.

5. Ask your supervisor and look for ways to accommodate. I ran into the issue of not having large enough bedding when I got here, but thanks to chance and the kindness of a friend, I was able to get a futon that was longer than my height. In other words, ask around and voice your concerns to your supervisor and anyone who you think will be able to help and they might surprise you with one or two things.

These are a few of the things that I am passing to you. Although Japan is a smaller country, there is a place for us tall people. It just takes some figuring out. So stand tall, tell the world how the weather is up here and be cool.

Terrell Wallin

*A note from your friendly neighborhood GEC ALT: Old Navy recently opened a store in Apita Town in Kanazawa and there is a GAP store in Forus at Kanazawa station. Both have more Western-sized clothing.*
Culture Shock in Japan (and more importantly, in Toyama)

富山県へようこそ！Welcome to Toyama Prefecture! It ain’t Tokyo (as I’m sure you’ll realize when the plane lands), but it does have a particular splendor about it: abundant rice paddies, a tranquil coastline, fresh seafood, a gorgeous mountain range, unique cultural festivals, and much more. Toyama has a lot to offer that you won’t find in the bigger prefectures. That’s why I love it. But then again, there’s a lot that Toyama can’t offer that you will find in the bigger prefectures. And that’s why some people aren’t too fond of it.

Making the transition to a countryside lifestyle is hard enough for foreigners who are already familiar with Japanese culture; but it can be teeth-grindingly frustrating for those who are experiencing it for the first time. Despite their geographical proximity, each prefecture in Japan boasts its own subculture, as well as its own collection of cutey mascots. Traditions, seasonal festivals, dialects, folktale, and cutey mascots are all apt to change every time you cross a border. As a result, even most Japanese people don’t know about Toyama’s uniqueness, or its cutey mascots. Q.E.D., the only surefire way to prepare yourself to live in Toyama is to do just that: live in Toyama.

The bad news is: you will undergo some form of culture shock at least once during your stay in Japan. The good news is: the bad news isn’t necessarily bad news. The trick about culture shock is not to think of ways to avoid it, but to think of ways to embrace it. I could have gone about this letter by typing out a thousand-point list of Japanese cultural peculiarities to watch out for, but 1] you wouldn’t read it (don’t worry, I wouldn’t blame you), and 2] I’ve only got a few pages. So instead, here are five of my tried-and-tested methods for making culture shock a little less shocking.

#1 Differentiate between accepting something and agreeing with it. You don’t have to agree with something to be able to accept that it exists. There are plenty of things about Japanese culture that I find disagreeable. I mean, they still use fax machines here for God’s sake. But whatever my personal grievances may be, I accept these cultural differences as necessary aspects of my life while I live here. This is not to say that you can’t teach your community about your home country’s cultural norms: by all means that’s a big part of the JET Program. But it is a two-way street. Open yourself up to Japanese culture before you insist that they learn yours. It goes a long way towards making you more approachable. Besides, constantly replying to new information with “yah well in my country we do it this way / we don’t do that” is a pretty good way to get yourself kicked off the invite list for parties.

#2 If you have a particular medical condition or lifestyle/dietary choice, be prepared to explain it at least a thousand times. I’ve got an across-the-board nut allergy. The thing is, nut allergies are not common here. In fact, what classifies as a nut is not really common knowledge here either. I’ve had to explain that soy beans are not nuts. I’ve had to explain that coconuts are not nuts. I’ve had to convince people that “yes, I will actually die if I eat that” before they stop asking me to “just try a bite” of a walnut-infested chocolate bar. Although it can be rather tempting to get angry at the people who require dozens (and dozens) of repeated explanations, take a minute to remind yourself that you’re living in a region that may not be culturally familiar with your condition. For me, being patient enough to give a few extra reminders is the difference between living comfortably and playing “Russian Roulette” with a cashew-loaded revolver. And I think I can say with a fair amount of confidence that most people with my condition would choose the former of those two options.

#3 Try everything at least once. Barring exemptions due to medical conditions or
lifestyle/dietary choices as explained in point #2, I recommend you try everything at least once. This means food, social gatherings, festivals, clubs, art forms, sports, &c. The “ALT Bubble” is a big problem for countryside JET communities. Don’t let yourself get trapped in it. You know how a dog will chase you if you make it think you’re running from it? Well picture culture shock as a big ol’ gnarly Rottweiler. The longer you try to stay away from Japanese culture, the harder it will bowl you over when it finally corners you. On the other hand, actively seeking to experience cultural differences will drastically increase your ability to tolerate them, in both mind and body. To put it perhaps a little too simply: you can’t get culture shock if you’re not shocked by the culture, right?

#4 Don’t attribute every unpleasant experience to culture shock. When you live in a foreign country, every upset is magnified tenfold. When you got the stink-eye from the cashier today, it was probably because you had forgotten some unspoken Japanese cashier-customer courtesy thing. And your service provider, they probably keep rescheduling your router installation date because foreigners aren’t supposed to have internet until they’ve lived in Japan for a few months. And just the other day you got all these weird looks from people, probably because it goes against Japanese etiquette to talk on the phone while walking. Or maybe: the cashier was just having one of those days and everyone got the stink-eye; your service providers just hired a new guy to do the scheduling and he keeps goofing it up; and you actually had your shirt on inside-out the whole day but didn’t notice. The ups and downs of life happen wherever you are, so be careful not to trick yourself into thinking that it’s all Japan’s fault.

#5 Have an out. If all else fails and culture shock has you lying in a puddle of your own tears wishing for just one bite of your mom’s mac ‘n’ cheese, then here’s what to do: have an out. There are a few import shops in Toyama (such as Yamaya or Jupiter, both of which are located in Toyama City) where you might find a piece of home, but ultimately you’re looking at a pretty decent level of cultural isolation. It’s up to you to make the connections you’ll need. Skype and Facebook are convenient ways of staying in touch socially, and most care packages mailed to Japan will find their owner within two weeks. The trick is to get these things rolling before you think you need them. I didn’t think that I needed all of those sugary treats from America when I asked my folks to mail them to me; but oh man did they come in handy a month later when I felt like the world was falling apart.

The wrap-up: As you get used to your life in Toyama, you will experience new things every week, if not every day. There will be some bumps along the way. Some may knock you down. If so, let them. The important thing is to not let them keep you down. Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, make a little note and stick it in the “Japanese Culture” folder of your mental filing cabinet, and you’ll be good to go. A helpful reminder is that we’ve all gone through this. We’re still going through it, actually. It’s a work-in-progress for everyone, but it gets easier as you go along. In due time, you’ll get to know all about Toyama. And its cutesy mascots too. Cheers!

Paul Dargan
Staying Sane

Congratulations and welcome to Toyama! I’m sure you’re super excited right now. You’re probably also a little bit stressed with all of your preparations. Don’t worry too much, you’ll be here and settled in before you know it!

I’m going to give you 7 tips to help you keep yourself feeling sane and relatively stress free. I’ve got some experience in this, because I somehow managed to keep myself sane during the 3 months I waited for my internet to be set up. I, unfortunately, had horrible luck and had a lengthy battle with getting internet set up in my apartment. Luckily, this is not usual. Most people will have internet within a month of their arrival. It was insanely frustrating but I stayed mostly sane thanks to the support of everyone around me.

Without further ado, here are my tips for maintaining your sanity!

1) Make yourself a schedule: You don’t have to have a rigid schedule that you never stray from, but it is best to establish some kind of routine in your daily life. Make sure you’re allowing yourself enough time to sleep and enough time to get ready in the morning. Don’t ever let yourself be late. Not only does this make you look really bad, but it also gives you unnecessary stress.

2) Keep your home and desk clean: Clean living and work spaces can do wonders for your mental wellbeing. Try to make yourself a cleaning schedule. It’s best to clean for a few minutes every day. Don’t let messes build up to the point that you have to spend 12 hours on a rare sunny Saturday cleaning your house because all of the bugs in Japan have taken up residence in your bedroom.

Also, be sure to keep your desk (or desks) at work clean. When you arrive, go through what you have been left by your predecessor. If you find things you don’t think you’ll have any use for, ask your supervisor if you can throw them out. You’ll have plenty of time in August to do a thorough cleaning of your desk. Start your life in Japan with a nice clean and clutter-free work desk!

3) Go outside: You’ll inevitably feel homesick when you first arrive and you’ll probably have to deal with culture shock at some point. These two things can make you want to curl up in a ball under your AC and never leave your apartment. Don’t let that happen. Go outside, even if it is just for a short walk to clear your head. If your supervisor is anything like mine, you’ll probably have a cellphone within a day of your arrival in Toyama. Use it to get in touch with someone and do something with them. Don’t let yourself become a hermit!

4) Socialize: This goes hand in hand with #3. Talk to other people. I guarantee that you’ll end up talking to yourself at some point. I’m sure that you’re an excellent conversationalist, but be sure to talk to other people too. This can be face to face conversation with people in Japan or e-mails and messages over the internet. Be sure to fulfill your social needs!

5) Do something fun: Just do anything you think is fun. Watch a movie, read your favourite book, go on a bike ride, wash your dishes… Anything at all. Be sure to take advantage of being in Japan. Get involved with a cultural club or sports team at your school. If there is a specific activity you want to do, ask around. You’re sure to either find someone who has information about where you can do that activity or someone who will want join you in your fun.
6) **Give yourself some downtime:** It’s important to let yourself recharge. There will be hundreds of exciting things to do when you first arrive, but be sure to give yourself time to relax. Don’t wear yourself thin. Take care of yourself. Have a glass of some of our delicious Toyama water and let yourself chill out.

7) **It’s okay to have a bad day:** Not every day is going to be sunshine and rainbows. You will have days where it seems like nothing will go your way. It’s important to not let those days weigh you down too heavily. Don’t keep your negative emotions bottled up, let your frustrations out! Toyama has plenty of wonderful people who will give you support if you need it. If you have a bad day, find someone to eat dinner or talk with. Don’t try to face your problems alone.

Hopefully these tips will help you out! I wish you all luck with your packing and your mountain of paperwork. Happy travels!

Beck Gingrich  
Reingri@gmail.com  
Sakurai Senior High School

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**Don’t get frustrated at work and in general**

Hi you,  
Welcome to Japan and to the lovely prefecture of Toyama. My name is Hiro, I’m from Miami, and this will be my 5th year on the program. I sincerely hope that you will enjoy your new home for the next one to five years.

My goal today is to briefly discuss a question and a couple of key points that will hopefully have at least a small positive impact on your time here, and in the future. I have spent 4 years now observing, listening, learning about, and pondering culture shock, cultural exchange, and what it is that causes such strong swells of positive and negative emotion in this journey of a lifetime. When I first arrived, all the new ALTs were overflowing with so much excitement and positivity, nervousness and confidence. But as I met the current group of ALTs, I noticed some powerful cynical negativity. What was going on here? How do people go from so high to so low?

I have shared countless hours with many others that have come and gone before you, discussing the areas around this question. And countless more hours alone with my thoughts. Which of those experiences should really be credited or blamed on the actual experience in Japan (culture shock), and what is just a consequence of growing up and life in general. What degree of our happiness is coming from external stimulus versus our own state of mind. The simple truth of the matter is that we can’t control much of the world around us, and the world doesn’t care either way. This can lead to one of the keystones of unhappiness, **frustration**. For daily life, I’d like to suggest a couple of ways that I learned recently from an exceptional writer named Eric Barker (blog: Barking up the Wrong Tree) to manage frustration from both the outside world, and from within yourself. For both, I want you to think about the quote by the author Charles R. Swindoll, “Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you react to it.” The following is a paraphrased summary of what he writes.

The first thing to think about is frustration from irrational expectations from external sources. Temper your expectations of others and of events. Remember that what you want to happen is never guaranteed. We all come here with certain
expectations, and if they are too high, we can be disappointed and frustrated. We start saying, “it SHOULD be this way or that!” None of us are the center of the universe, even if it might feel like that when we first get here. It’s a mirage. The sooner you internalize that the better. Oh, and ABCD. When you start feeling Adversity to your expectations, check if your Beliefs in your expectations were irrational, take care not to let the Consequences of that irrational belief become anger, frustration, or depression, and finally Dispute the irrationality; “The universe never guaranteed me a trouble free existence. This will pass. I will survive.” Every moment you spend complaining about the negative, is a moment of your life that you could spend on the positive, now lost forever.

The other thing to think about is frustration from the inside. A lot of common wisdom suggests high self-esteem is a fountain of happiness and success in life. But recent studies have found that artificially boosted self-esteem doesn’t protect from frustration and depression, but contributed to an increase in narcissism. When a person with low or artificially high self-esteem failed at something, they both had similar feelings of worthlessness in the aftermath. The artificial high self-esteem may have even exacerbated it, by increasing the expectations of one’s abilities prior to failure. Real self-esteem and beneficial confidence is achievable, but as a byproduct of success, and only from there can be built upon and used towards future successes. What has been proven to create success, happiness, and high self-esteem is something called self-compassion. Stay with me here. If you go to the blog I mentioned, you will see that the Navy Seals, among others, do this.

So, what is self-compassion? It’s when you stop lying to yourself that you’re so awesome, and instead, focus on forgiving yourself when you’re not. Why? Research shows increasing self-compassion has all the benefits attributed to self-esteem — but without the downsides. It’s really easy to do. Next time that critical voice in your head starts going and you think you need a self-esteem boost, instead reach for some self-compassion. You can do this by reframing whatever the voice says into something more positive. If it helps you more, visualize a compassionate figure and have them say it to you. When we focus on self-esteem, we often build ourselves up by comparing ourselves to others. In the end, this is a losing strategy. Even if we come out ahead, it still distances us from other people and that’s no path to happiness. By remembering that everybody screws up you not only engage your compassion muscles but you also draw yourself closer to others. You’re not better or worse. We’re all imperfect. That’s okay, and it unites everyone.

So, this may all sound unnecessary now, and may even rain on your parade a little bit, but I guarantee that for some of you it will come in handy one day when things suddenly aren’t what you expected. In any case, I hope you have an amazingly nice time and that you look for the goodness in everything and everyone you meet while here. Including me😊

I’m certainly looking forward to meeting you!

Until then,
HiroyoshiMurasaki
Learning Japanese in Japan

If you don’t know Japanese, that’s fantastic! Welcome! I am also a super newb- the fact that I understand any Japanese at all is a full switch from a year ago. Soon, (if you are determined to learn Japanese) you will know as much as I do!

*Full disclosure, I’m not fantastic at Japanese, I haven’t even tried to take the JLPT (and if I’m being honest with myself, I don’t really want to, anyway). This is just info from super newb to super newb.

Plenty of ALTs come to Japan and don’t learn Japanese. You don’t have to and you can get by without. However, I think it makes work easier (most of your coworkers won’t want to talk to you in English), makes students more comfortable around you, makes buying groceries easier, and enhances cultural experiences. Life is a little bit more comfortable when you know what is going on around you. And it will also obviously bolster your resume to know another language. Whatever reason you have for trying is a good enough reason to start.

If you want to learn Japanese- you’re going to have to put time into it. You don’t know it yet, but during the school year you are going to have epic amounts of free time without classes. When you first arrive you won’t have much to do outside of settling in and preparing your first lessons. This is the perfect opportunity to complain about how much you’re sweating and have nothing to do OR to study Japanese (and countless other things). You don’t have to sacrifice much free (fun) time in order to study. The most important thing is knowing how to get started and finding out what is best for you:

1. **Activate your super newb powers**- Start by learning hiragana and katakana. Hiragana is necessary for learning Japanese and katakana is (amongst other things) necessary for ordering food at restaurants. There are a lot of resources for this so I will just drop a few here:
   - [http://genki.japantimes.co.jp/self_en](http://genki.japantimes.co.jp/self_en)

2. **Learn important kanji** such as entrance, exit, stop, staff room, nearby town names, days of the week, train signs, and of the utmost importance —— symbols for the different gendered restrooms———pretty early on. It’ll help you avoid embarrassing situations and also missing trains for meetings in other towns. You don’t really want to be THAT super newb. (I should know, I was).

   This is a good website for learning basic kanji. It uses mnemonics and feels like a game. I could read most of my JTEs names after using just the first level

3. **Be curious.** This is one of my best super powers. (I think all super newbs are born with this power, but I am not an expert) I always ask my students/teachers/coworkers/ALTs/favorite sushi restaurant owners what words mean, what items are, the appropriate phrases to say, etc. Most people will tell you if they’re too busy to answer your questions but they’ll be patient with you, too. The words I learned in context are the words that I remember the best. My students love teaching me (and making a fool out of me) and teachers get a kick out of it, too. Every week, my librarian asks me what I’ve learned then we chat using our
respective dictionaries.

Your mother may have told you it was rude, but in the name of personal progress and learning: Eavesdrop. Some of the coolest phrases I know I learned in my office from hearing them all the time. I also learned how to say “eggplant pickled in mustard.” Unfortunately, one of our super newb powers is drowning out unfamiliar sounds/background noise. This will work against you. Fight it.

4. **Books and studying materials:** Do the JET language course. It’s free and easy. But don’t rely on only this. Some popular textbooks are Genki and Minna no nihongo (but there are others if you don’t like these ones). If you ask around, someone might have old books for you to use or the intertubes will have them. It’s easy to do these on your own, with a group, with a class, or with a private tutor.

5. **Go to a class.** AKA super newb gatherings. If you have time after school this is the cheapest way to get lessons. We DON’T have the superpower of travelling at the speed of light, so these can be difficult to get to if you live on the outskirts of the prefecture. Try to find one in your town. This is the Toyama International Center list of classes: http://www.tic-toyama.or.jp/english/life/school_in.html

6. **Get a private tutor.** Ask your trusted senpai about who is in your area. This is a great way to get a person with Japanese as a first language to sit down and help you out. It can be useful to have someone to hold you accountable. You’re paying for their time- and if investing money into learning Japanese doesn’t motivate you to study, I am not sure what will. Also, for those of you with an advanced power of curiosity, it should comfort you that this is a person who will not get annoyed if you have a lot of questions.

7. **Flashcards.** This is good for either kana or kanji. You can buy flashcards at the hundred yen store OR you can use your handy dandy smart phone with apps like memrise or Anki. These are easy to use and there are usually readymade flashcards for specific textbooks or JLPT levels. Also good for long train rides, since no one is going to talk to you on the train, anyway.

8. **All Japanese all of the time.** Listening to movies/music/anime can help you get accustomed to pronunciation, intonation and phrases but won’t explicitly teach you much. (Remember, one of your super newb powers is that you can drown out unfamiliar background noise- it’s enhanced when you have English subtitles) You could also just spend every night at bars/cafes trying to talk to the Japanese suits that go after work (there is a mythological Himi ALT who did this). It’s likely (if you drink) that another one of your super newb powers is that you can out drink your Japanese counterparts.

You’ll pick up some Japanese even if you never try (the ULTIMATE super newb power), your fellow ALTs may tease you or try to lord their superior skills over you BUT you’ll benefit from trying to learn Japanese while here, anyway. And you’re a super newb ---another one of your superpowers is being unfazed by airs of superiority. Just the act of trying improves connections between the people you interact with and it will enhance your experience in Japan. Plenty of fantastic people in Japan have limited English skills and you’re not really here just to teach English. That’s easy to forget. So, if you choose to learn Japanese, make the most of it, make it as comfortable as you need it to be and find what works best for you. You don’t have to do any or all of the above. The ALTs around you all have varied experiences and levels of Japanese and are
generally kind enough to point you in the right direction for more resources. Hopefully this is enough to get you started. Progress is exciting. Understanding what is happening around you is exciting. Godspeed super newbs.

Ariel
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Professionalism as an ALT

You know what professionalism is. And just in case you forgot, your home country orientations and the Tokyo Orientation will definitely remind you. A lot. You will hear it repeated from many sources: “You are expected to be professional at all times, even outside work, because you are a public servant, whose pay check comes from taxpayer money, and you are also representing your entire country to Toyama citizens.”

Big responsibility. Fortunately, you can handle professionalism. You might have had a job which required a high degree of professionalism, but even if you haven’t, the concept is very familiar. Professionalism means, basically,

- Punctuality,
- Following the dress code,
- Getting your responsibilities done well,
- Respecting your peers.

The question I’m going to answer here is What does professionalism look like, as an ALT in Toyama?

In General
Professionalism as a teacher, anywhere, means devoting a lot of energy and time. In Japan, teachers sometimes come to school 7 days a week, staying until past 6pm. This is not expected of you – regularly – but it might happen once in a while. Depending on the situation, if you’re asked to stay late, you might be compensated with time off later.

What will make those long days easier is awareness of your schedule. The quicker you get a grasp on your responsibilities, the quicker you can learn your schedule and any upcoming events. Do your best to ask questions when you don’t know something – “Where do I have to be, when? What exactly are we doing? What should I prepare?” You can always ask your supervisor for help.

However, even if you asked ALL THE QUESTIONS beforehand, got all the answers, and prepared everything perfectly, surprises will come at you. Very often this will be because A) nobody remembered to tell you, or B) something genuinely unexpected. When this happens – and it will – what you need is grace under pressure. Adjust, go with the flow, keep moving, be frustrated later. Professionalism requires flexibility.

The First Day
First impressions count. Guys, definitely wear a suit, until you get a better idea of the dress code for the school. Ladies, wear a suit as well. Probably after the first week you
will find that summer dress code is a little different than other times of the year, but pay close attention. Every school is different.

Politeness also counts. You don’t have to speak Japanese to smile, nod, or look apologetic if you interrupt someone.

It can be very overwhelming. “Here is your desk, here is the office, here is the password to the computer, do you know about this? Here is a page of Japanese, here is your contract, here is the map to the nearest supermarket.” If you need to take notes, or make videos on your phone to remember where things are, do it. No shame.

Unspoken Cultural Differences
Things are different here. You will probably be impressed with lots of small and large things all at once: things that are commonplace in your culture may be totally inappropriate in Toyama, and vice versa. Chances are, as you acclimate to the new environment, you will make mistakes. … And what’s more, people may not even tell you that you’re doing something wrong (it’s rude to point out people’s differences) (Japanese culture at work). Fortunately, being the new ALT means you have some leeway to make errors as you settle in.

Lateness
Toyama JET Darren Hamilton said this best:
“Punctuality in Japanese society is sacrosanct. People are on time. Always. Meetings begin and end when they’re intended to, and trains arrive on the dot.” …Okay, this is in fact the ideal, and the reality cannot live up to it, but Japanese sure try their hardest. Do not be late to your job, your classes, your dentist appointment, or anything. In fact, try to arrive no later than five minutes before any obligation. Arriving one minute before something starts is the same as being late to the average Japanese worker. Everyone will get one or two screw ups, but your frequent lateness will definitely be noted.”

Appearance: Piercings, Tattoos and B.O.
Most Japanese schools are very conservative. Stick to the dress code of your school(s), which in general opts for modesty and cleanliness. It’s fine if you have piercings, but take out any facial piercings or spacers before work. Guys, it’s definitely not okay to wear piercings in the classroom. Also, tattoos have a very negative stigma, so also cover them up while you’re at work (or at least, in front of the students).

In that same vein, bathe regularly. In the heat of summer this is particularly … noticeable, shall we say. A pungent odor, a dishevelled set of clothes, messy hair, or an accidentally unshaved face not only reflects badly on you – but it contributes to a bad stereotype of the “unkempt foreigner.”

Good Morning
Say it with me now: Ohayō gozaimasu. – “Good morning.”

Lots of people will probably say this to you, every day – so why not say it back, friendly-like?

Leaving Early
Your quitting-time is generally earlier than other teachers’. So even though you’re technically leaving on time, it still might feel early to those who are still hard at work. As you pass the other teachers, or as you walk out the door, you can say,
Osaki nishitsureishimasu. – “Excuse me for leaving early.” This is considered polite and standard, because you’re apologizing to the team for “deserting them” early. Another, probably more common phrase is

Otsukaresamadeshita. – “Thanks for the hard work.” That one emphasizes how hard the other person has been working, and it’s also both standard and polite. It’s usually said after a long day or a tiring activity.

Requests from Other Teachers

Japan is a society of team-oriented accomplishment. If a teacher in your school asks you to do something, such as answer a grammar question, write a random speech in English, correct a pile of tests, or supervise a project, make every effort to do it. If you don’t have time right then, explain that it will be done in the next few days.

Enkai

If you haven’t read up on enkais, the “mandatory” after-work parties found in nearly all businesses in Japan, do so now. Enkais have a lot of traditions, and (sometimes) very formal rules built into them. Usually they celebrate something (your arrival, a farewell, finishing the year, welcoming new teachers, etc.). You can probably expect to be invited to an enkai about once a month. You don’t always have to accept, of course – but since “the team” is paramount, and this is a chance for “the team” to relax and build relationships, it’s important to value your co-workers. Please consider carefully before you turn it down.

If you do decline an enkai, say you have a pressing engagement that’s very important at the same time, and you’d like to attend, but you simply can’t.

Likewise, you don’t have to drink alcohol at an enkai. Many teachers drive in Toyama, and you cannot drink and drive, so non-alcoholic beverages are usually readily available.

The enkai environment is very special and strange. Teachers who are usually quiet and businesslike will have a few drinks and suddenly become loud and friendly, and may even start using broken English at you. Grab a bottle of whatever you like and enjoy the relaxed atmosphere – knowing full well that nobody will mention ANY of this back in the office on Monday.

The “A” stands for Assistant

Remember, in general, you are hired to help the Japanese Teachers of English. That help can take lots of different forms, different amounts of work, etc – but in the end, you’re the assistant. You are expected to follow the guidelines/instructions of the lead teacher, who is truly responsible for the class.

Remember What’s Not Your Job

It’s not your job to model behavior typical in your home country. It’s not your job to experience Japan to the fullest. It’s not your job to learn or use Japanese at all. It’s not your job to reform or change the school system in Japan. And it’s not your job to magically deliver your students to English fluency.

Are these things beneficial, and useful? Yes. Should you try to do them? Definitely feel free! – But remember, your contract is about team-teaching the English language, one class at a time. Place priority on what is expected of you, and make all other goals secondary.
Personal Well-Being
You will have a lot to deal with, emotionally, mentally, and perhaps physically. That naturally causes stress. It’s important to take care of yourself so you can bring your best game to your job (and, just for your own sake).

- Eat regularly. Figuring out a source of food is both an immediate necessity and a months-long adventure. Whether or not you buy weird things at the supermarket, play around with local ingredients, or find local restaurants … *eat something*. Hungry, tired, forgetful teachers don’t do anyone any good.

- Culture shock can have a huge impact on your teaching ability. Be sure to read up on what to expect – be prepared – create a support network to help you when you need it.

- Build good workplace relationships. It’s very easy, in a school where you don’t speak the language and you’re the only foreigner, to feel isolated and left out. Miscommunications are common, and people (including you) make assumptions that might be wrong. After multiple experiences like this, you may feel as if you’ve been outcast from the group, when in reality there is actually no ill intent toward you. In fact, many ALTs in the past have found themselves in just this situation, feeling both ostracized and unwelcome. Some ALTs react poorly, by slacking off, not taking their job seriously, losing respect for their co-workers. And that ends badly. So … how do you counteract these situations? Mostly, by *being professional*, by checking your own attitude, by recognizing your feelings aren’t the most important thing, the students are. But also, by building relationships, early on. The early burden is on you to start conversations, say hello, and it’s really, really worthwhile to do it. Being proactively friendly, opening the door to a relationship, might make the difference when the tables turn, and instead of feeling isolated, you’ll have a connection to someone.

Good luck. Enjoy your new job, the new environment, and the new students who will benefit from your knowledge and energy.
And enjoy beautiful Toyama!

Kate Grayson
Toyama Chubu SHS
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Shopping

Welcome to the Toyama community and congratulations on getting a placement with JET! You did it! Before too long, you’ll find yourself in Toyama enjoying your new life. You will get here, most likely jet-lagged and overwhelmed by all the newness, and just want to relax, but one thing you will have to do is buy some necessities. I hope this letter will answer some of the questions you may have about shopping in Japan.

Hopefully before you arrive, you will have been in contact with your predecessor. They can give you an idea of what will already be waiting for you when you arrive in your place. They might also ask you if you want to buy certain things off of them. You don’t have to if you don’t want to, but know that this may be an option. There will most likely be some smaller things that are left to you that aren’t mentioned by your predecessor. I would highly recommend going through all of this stuff before going out shopping,
because otherwise you may want to kick yourself when you buy something that your apartment already has.

**Shops**

So, you took inventory and you’re missing some stuff. Time to go shopping! It really depends on where you live, but there are some things to look out for. Ask someone or find out where the nearby drug stores, convenience stores, and grocery stores are. It’s also good to ask if there’s a 100 yen store and recycle shop nearby. You can get a lot of nice things at a cheap price at these stores.

The most popular 100 yen store around here seems to be Daiso. You can find most of the smaller things that you will need for your house here. The stores will have office supplies, dishes, stuff for cleaning, and even some food! I highly recommend checking out a 100 yen store before going anywhere else, especially if you’re looking to save money. You will probably want to get some things elsewhere, but the quality of the items is usually great.

As for clothes, there should always be a number of smaller shops. If you’re looking for the variety that a mall might offer, the two most popular malls in the area are Favore in Toyama and Aeon Mall in Takaoka. One of the most popular shops for getting nice clothes for relatively cheap is Uniqlo. They have a number of shops in various places. The sizes are similar, but be aware that certain things, such as jeans, might fit a bit differently, so it’s probably best to try them on. Also, you might not be able to find stuff at Uniqlo if you need larger sizes. However, there are some big & tall shops in Toyama (there is one in Toyama called 4L). If you also need a bigger shoe size, you might be better off just bringing a lot of shoes or having them sent over. I get laughed at when I go into shoe stores and tell them what size I need…

Another option you have is shopping online! Amazon.co.jp has a lot of great deals and can save you the time of tracking certain things down. There is also a lovely button on the top to change the site into English. While some things on the site will still be in Japanese, the important information for payment will be in English. The easiest methods of payment are paying at a convenience store or buying a prepaid card. Amazon is so easy and quick too! If you’re into online shopping, you should also check out Rakuten.

If the Internet and stores in Toyama just aren’t offering what you want them to, you can also check out Kanazawa, the biggest city that’s nearby. While it’s in the next prefecture (Ishikawa), it’s relatively easy to get there and getting there isn’t too expensive. There are definitely a lot more options in Kanazawa and you should be able to find more imported/foreign stuff there.

**Payment**

So, now comes the painful part: saying farewell to your money and paying. Hopefully you’ve heard it before now, but it’s worth repeating: Japan is still for the most part a cash-based society. Although more places are starting to accept credit cards, you do not want to rely on a credit card. Most of your purchases will be paid for with cash. Depending on your situation, you may also pay certain bills with cash. Be aware that ATMs do close in Japan though. Make sure you figure out when the ATMs are open, so that you don’t find yourself in a situation where you’re left with no cash and can’t withdraw anymore. There may also be fees if you use certain ATMs or use an ATM past a certain time, so be careful of that!
Although most of the time you will just be exchanging cash for goods, there are a few different ways to pay, especially if you purchase something online. Some sites will still offer a cash on delivery (COD) service. The delivery person will usually call you on the day of delivery and ask when you are free (they will more than likely speak Japanese, so if you’re not confident in your Japanese skills, see if someone can help you). When they arrive, you will give them the amount you owe them in cash and they will hand you your package!

A lot of the time you can pay for items in a convenience store. Some bills (such as cell phone and internet bills) you might also pay for in a convenience store. If you hand the person the bill (you don’t even have to say anything), they should know what to do and will ring it up like anything else.

You can also purchase things like tickets or pay for online purchases at convenience stores. Probably the most popular and easiest way of doing this is to use the Loppi machine at the convenience store Lawson’s. You should be able to find this pretty easily if you walk into Lawson’s. While the machine is in Japanese, a lot of sites that allow you to use Loppi to pay will give you detailed instructions in English. It usually involves inputting a few payment numbers and some personal information. You will get a receipt; you can take this receipt to the cashier and pay with cash.

Another method of payment that you may have to use is a bank transfer. In order to do a bank transfer, you will need to get some bank information (bank name, number, name, etc.) from the recipient. You can do a bank transfer from an ATM at the bank, and the money will come right out of your account. This will most likely be in Japanese and it can be a bit overwhelming. If you really need to do a bank transfer and aren’t confident in your Japanese skills, I strongly recommend asking someone who has a strong command of Japanese to help you. You can find guides online, but it may vary slightly depending on your bank, and those slight changes could leave you confused.

One last payment method worth mentioning is using prepaid cards. You can usually find prepaid cards for services such as iTunes in convenience stores. There are also some pre-paid credit cards that work as if you had a Japanese credit card. While I am mentioning those here, I want to also caution anyone looking into these. There are mixed feelings about these and it could very well be the case that the one you pick up won’t work for a certain website. Some of them also require you to make an online account (in Japanese) and this can be a bit confusing. It’s possible that these could help you in a situation where a site only accepts credit cards, but be aware that it could cause more trouble and you might be better off just looking into other methods of payment.

So, there you have a summary of some of the basics of shopping in Japan! This is really only an introduction. Once you start shopping, you’ll figure more things out. It can be scary at first, but you will soon get the hang of it! Certain things may be different in some areas, but I think most of the things covered here should be the same.

Get excited! Before you know it, you’ll be starting your new life in the wonderful land of Toyama! I look forward to meeting you when you come. If you have any questions, feel free to send me an email. I know it can be overwhelming in the beginning. I’m happy to help!

Steve Zellmer
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Hey there you brave, adventurous person! Welcome to your new awesome life in Japan! If this is your first time in the East, then please, let me first cut through all the not so fun parts about it and assure you, it will be amazing!

Actually, I’ve only arrived in April so I can only speak to being here for the first couple months. This is really just my experience, but I think you might find some worth in it.

Hopefully you will be lucky enough to be in Tokyo for at least 3 days for the orientation. I wasn’t granted that luxury. I arrived at the hotel the night before my orientation about 9pm (then had to wake up at 7am to make it down by 7:30)...had a full day of me trying not to poke myself in the eye with the pencil I was propping my eyelids open with...then off to Toyama the following morning (7 am!). Basically, it’s all a blur, but I do remember two things: I was tired and it was torture.

Then I got to Toyama, and had like two days to get all my affairs in order (apartment, car, phone, groceries, papers to sign, meeting people, more papers to sign, meeting more people, signing more papers). I did it all on auto-pilot because let’s face it, I felt like death. But then that was over, and it’s time to settling into this new life. If you have zero knowledge of Japanese, you are going to feel helpless and frustrated and sad especially when you go to the supermarket by yourself and can’t find the salt. And no, I’m not trying to scare you. I promise, it is better that you know now. Arm yourselves! I studied Japanese for 3 years so while it was still overwhelming, at least I wasn’t at a total loss.

And I know you may think you are so resilient and you are able to handle the culture difference and being without your family and friends. But there will be moments when you might suffer severe bouts of sadness and loneliness when you realize how far away your friends and family are. Trust me...you will have that meltdown in your apartment one day when you are like “Oh my gawwwd!!! This is horrible! What is this life?!?” You might cry, and feel like you’re at the edge of desolation. With that said, I can honestly tell you, hang in there, it never gets any worse than this. In fact, it is only natural that you will miss that familiarity especially in the first few weeks when you are the newbie and everyone is introducing themselves to you and you can’t remember half the people you’ve met. But trust me, it doesn’t matter whose names you’ve forgotten, they will remember you, they will check up on you and you can be assured that they will help you if you need anything.

Ok, so now that I’ve scared you, it’s deserving that I soothe your soul with songs of good cheer! Toyama! Regardless of which city you are placed (Tonami, Takaoka, Kurobe etc.) this is a gorgeous place to live and explore, and the people here are just the best. They are so friendly and polite and they will make an effort to help you even if they speak no English and you speak no Japanese. The Toyama JET community is also pretty tight, so you can be certain that people actually do want to be around you. I had like the very best people always around for the first couple of days just making sure I was ok, settling fine and basically being my personal super heroes. It’s really easy to make friends with these folks, you’ve just got to be willing.

One advice I can swear on is to turn whatever challenge you may have into something positive. Missing your friends back home? Missing the stuff you use to do? I suggest you use the incredibly large amount of free time you will have to cultivate an
interest….let’s see….what was it you liked to do when you were 12 years old? Do that. It not only makes the transitions easier but you are able to spend creative time with yourself without feeling too lonely. As for your school(s), I work at a small junior high school and visit two elementary schools. My kids are fun and awesome and I love working with them. Even when they get loud and rowdy, I’m usually amused more than annoyed (and that’s saying a lot because kids were never on my list of likes.) Other ALTs have different experiences at their schools so it’s all up to how you view your interactions. Just make the best out of it.

My biggest tip for school (especially when it comes to etiquette and other little things apart from the actual teaching) is “people don’t notice your mistakes as much as you think they do.” I remember with painstaking clarity the first few days when leaving the office I kept saying “Otsukaresamadeshit” (which basically translates to : “Listen up, I’m tired of this, I’m getting the hell out of here while you guys sit and work some more!” instead of the accepted “Osakini shitsurei shimasu”(I’m sorry to be leaving while you have to work). Oh, yes, they will nod and smile evening after evening and not tell you that you’re wrong. Don’t sweat the small stuff though, just move on from it. As it pertains to the whole ‘gaijin-shock’, just cut people slack. They will stare, point and ask weird questions all the time, might touch you and poke at your hair…but it’s ok. I mean, if Channing Tatum was living in my town I’m sure I would be way worse. It’s pretty much the same vibe. You will have to learn to either ignore it or laugh at it. I just revel in the glory of the attention I get buying milk.

All in all, you will love it here. I’ve experienced ‘cheap and good’ redefined with 100 yen sushi. Yes, that’s good sushi for less than 1USD. And the nomihodai may have your liver hating you but who cares! You’re in Japan! Just don’t drink and drive….never drink and drive. EVER. There are lots of places to visit, beautiful gardens, temples and stuff if you are a nature freak like I am. If you will be driving, I recommend taking lots of trips around the prefecture just to experience all of its awesomeness. By the first weekend of getting my car, I was taking solo road trips!

Ok, I’ve exhausted myself with this, so I will leave my top five pieces of advice that will make this so much easier:

1. **People don’t notice your mistakes as much as you might think. Quit obsessing about it!**
2. **Cut people slack. They are usually without malicious intent.**
3. **Act the way you want to feel!**
4. **Spend time with people**
5. **Cultivate a passion (photography, writing, craft, dancing etc.)**

You’ll do fine! Welcome and can’t wait to meet you!

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Welcome to Toyama!
When I first discovered the prefecture I was based in, I went straight to Wikipedia to check it out. There was a dispiriting lack of information available—though it did use the phrase “Industrial centre”. Immediately my mind conjured the image of myself living in between steel mills and chemical factories. Thankfully Toyama is a particularly beautiful prefecture and almost the opposite in fact of a concrete jungle.

While beauty is good for the soul, sometimes you might also want company and social diversions with other ALT’s. That’s where your AJET committee steps in, waving frantically for your attention. We arrange events and activities to bring ALT’s from all over the ken together. Last year our Social Reps organized a range of different activities—from a Welcome Beach party, to Halloween and a Winter Masquerade Ball to a picnic under the Sakura blossoms and a Field day to take advantage of our lovely spring sunshine.

For those keen to explore the rest of Japan, our Excursions Reps have been known organize trips to Kyoto and Osaka as well as Fuji Q amusement park and a Ski and Snowboarding weekend at an Olympic resort in Nagano.

AJET also runs the TRAM (Toyama’s Random Ass Magazine) and its website of the same name (so as to not confuse matters) which feature an eclectic mix of articles—from recipes, to humor, poetry, advice and explorations into the dark underbelly of life in Japan. Anyone is free to contribute to this, though of course your work will also be for free. Our flinty eyed editorial team say to look at it as an opportunity.

Finally, and on a slightly more serious note, our Charity Reps will organize events to try and raise funds for causes. Last year this included a bake sale and a fiendishly difficult pub quiz. All of these activities are open to the whole community, not just JET’s and they are a great way to meet people out of your own area. We are quite a varied bunch. Be warned.

There are also many social opportunities outside of AJET. For example many ALT’s have organized groups and gatherings to support a wide variety of different interests. Some of these include, but aren’t limited to a short story group, a book club, a film making club, a charity play, acro yoga, a hill climbing club, a running club, swing dance, a sit down games and a table top RPG club. If you have any specific interests and you’d like to see if anyone else is keen, advertise on the Toyama Community Facebook page and get a group together! You’ll be surprised at the wide range of skills, talents and interest in trying new things we all have. Though some of us do have a lamentable propensity to injure ourselves or get lost very easily.

I look forward to meeting you when you arrive. Hopefully you will enjoy Toyama as much as I do.

Domhnall Mc Farline
AJET Prefectural Representative
Izumi Senior High School Toyama.