

# Welcome, welcome, welcome!



Your new home is near the mountains, by the sea- an ideal environment not only in Japan, but gorgeous by any global standard. Toyama is a strange land where large flowers bloom in the trees, ignoring the knee-deep snow beneath them. Houses seem to float along the ground when the spring breeze churns the flooded rice fields. Summer sunsets blaze orange on the horizon, as you prepare to watch one of the many firework displays of the season.

Nervous as you may be to live in the “countryside,” you will quickly glean from these letters that we wouldn’t have it any other way. You can still get your big-city fix; many of us do enjoy traveling to Tokyo or Osaka during the weekends and long breaks. The shinkansen makes the trip only a few hours long. However, you too may come to appreciate the journey back home, when you breathe in the crisp clean air and sip the purest water in all of Japan.

I am Elise Reller, a senior high school ALT as well as the Prefectural Advisor (PA) for Toyama. There are three PAs in Toyama. Including me, (the JET PA,) you have Yoshikuni sensei and Sugano 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 important information and relay news as soon as we get it. You are also supported in your local area by four Regional Representatives. They are great resources for advice on what’s going on in your community, or just life in your area.

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 are eager to help you settle in, so they have thoughtfully crafted letters on a variety of topics-general life information as well as the niche topics for which you may have questions. Worried about having fun things to do? The Toyama AJET letter highlights the trips and events planned for JETs. Nervous about your school? We cover that in about 5 different areas. Will you be starting a long-distance relationship and want some advice? Our team gives you a realistic approach to your situation.

Please don’t hesitate to contact me, even if it is just a simple hello. You can also check out the Toyama JETs website <http://www.toyamajets.net>. If you would like to get in touch with your soon-to-be peers, you can check out the Toyama Community Facebook group.

Elise Reller

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# LIFE IN TOYAMA

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Dear you- soon to be Toyama-ian

## WELCOME TO TOYAMA!

At this moment you are yet to discover quite how lucky you are. When I say to you that Toyama is one of the best places to live in the whole of Japan, it is going to sound like so much hyperbole. You might accuse me of 'drinking the kool-aid' (an expression I've picked up from my American cousins- the Irish term for it is not suitable for a welcome letter).

In any case though, give it a couple of months, then talk to me again and see if you can handle the truth; Toyama is an amazing place.

At this point you are probably thinking- well that's all well and good but give me some information please. What is Toyama like? Will I live my life surrounded by rice fields? What are the people like here? How will my life be like a couple of months from now?

This last question of course I cannot answer. I may be writing this welcome letter, but my all-encompassing knowledge only goes so far. Instead I'll try and fill you in on some useful information on this Prefecture and what you can expect.

The first thing you will notice when you step off the plane is our amazing mountain range. I am completely serious when I say that they still take my breath away sometimes, almost four years on. You might be walking, having a bit of a chat with someone and then from behind a building.... They can be seen from almost everywhere in the prefecture depending on the weather, and seem to be almost in-touching distance.

As well as the vista which will probably soon mark your cover photo- the mountains also provide great hikes and walks, and in winter, cheap snowboarding and skiing. Coming from Ireland, I had done neither in my life before and so I've spent many a winter weekend cheerfully falling face-first into the snow.

Happily for the hot summer months, we are by the sea, too, and there are a number of beaches to chill out at. If you like cycling there are also a number of cool routes about- Toyama's cities are mostly on the flat so it's pretty easy going.

The keen eyed of you will have probably picked up at this point that Toyama is not the futuristic city scape that I at least imagined before arriving. To put it bluntly we are, as the Japanese say, in the Inaka (countryside). You will see a lot of rice fields (whether you get placed in a city or not.) And all the better for

it.

However though, Toyama is not quite as those in the big smoke of Tokyo might paint us. We have a couple of reasonably sized cities here, with shopping, a wide range of restaurants both Japanese and foreign cuisines, as well as large number of different bars and nightlife. The excellent public transport system and compact cities mean wherever you live, you are not far from a city or meeting up with others.

And now for what those who get placed in the big cities are going to miss out on: Toyama is real old school Japan. We have so many festivals and cultural events it gets silly.

Traditional dances, hundreds of years old, moving slowly up an ancient street lit by candle light? Check. People riding giant paper floats and crashing them into each other, trying to rip each other's floats apart? Check. Hitting a bell with a giant log of wood on your shoulder..... You already know the answer to this. (Also the best sushi and water in Japan)

So that's natural beauty, cultural events, sports- what about the people?

Native Toyama-ians (not actually a word used outside of me) are a pretty friendly lot, though they can be a bit shy, especially if speaking English. Even with my laughable pronunciation of Japanese, people have always been kind and helpful to me.

The JET community here definitely can speak English though, tis our bread and butter after all. When you arrive you will be part of a JET community of almost 90 odd, from a wide array of different backgrounds and cultures. Depending on your interests, there is rarely a weekend that goes by in which there isn't something planned.

You will also find we have many different clubs and societies here. Some of these include, but aren't limited to; a short story group, a book club, a film making club, a charity play, various yoga groups, a hill climbing club, a running club, swing dance and 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 to trying new things we all have.

Welcome to our community! I am really looking forward to meet you.

Domhnall Mc Farline

Izumi Senior High School Toyama.

## PACKING: TO BRING OR NOT TO BRING?

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Yooooooo. Welcome to Toyama. You've heard it a million times and will hear it a million more- you are incredibly lucky. Toyama is a beautiful place with beautiful people and you will cry every clear day when you peer out at the gorgeous mountains.

Now that's out of the way -- what will you bring to such a beautiful place?

**SUITCASES** You've got 2 checked bags, 1 carry on, and 1 personal item.

I recommend bringing the largest checked luggage you have, but remember to weigh them!! Last year, MANY people at the airport were frantically throwing things away or moving things around to different bags. Don't be one of those people. Weigh your bag beforehand and if it's too heavy, you might want to simply pay the overweight baggage fee. That will be cheaper than having things shipped from home.

Keep everything you need for Tokyo orientation in your carry-on and send both checked bags ahead of you to Toyama. You can choose to send only one bag, and keep the other bag during orientation, but for me, it was a lot easier to send both ahead and not worry about it.

Finally, I recommend a regular sized backpack for your personal item because 1 - It's the largest thing you can get away with stuffing under your seat and 2 - Then you have a backpack with you in Japan, yay!

**CLOTHES** Coming from East Tennessee, I thought I knew hot, humid weather. However, I was not prepared to live for months soaked in sweat 24/7. It's going to be gross when you arrive, but you'll honestly get used to it to the point where being sweat-damp is the norm (and you don't even care).

The good news for work clothes is that in summer the dress code switches to "cool biz". This means you won't have to wear suits every day in summer, yay! You need to wear a suit the day you fly into Toyama though, and it will be really nasty. I'm sorry.

I recommend packing 2 suits, and one of them must be black for ceremonies. Work wear differs between level and school, so you'll have to ask your predecessor what to wear on usual work days. For me, it was actually a lot easier to find attractive, light, work appropriate clothes in Japan (stores like UNIQLO) than in the States. If you think Japanese clothes will be fine for you, don't worry too much about bringing a huge work wardrobe.

You will also need inside shoes for school. Anything comfortable and easy to slip on and off (Keds, Toms, Crocs, etc.). If you have more than one school you can buy shoes for each, or have one pair that you carry to school in your bag.

Toyama also has intense winters!!!!!! Don't try to pack winter clothes in your luggage. You can have your family or a trusted friend ship it to you later. But, like summer wear, you can buy really great winter clothes in Toyama (again, UNIQLO). I just packed one or two hats and scarves I like, and a jacket. Toyama has a lot of rain and snow!!!!!! You will need an umbrella, rain boots, and a rain jacket or poncho. But, I recommend buying them here. Especially an umbrella. Please don't use up precious packing space on an umbrella.

**OMIYAGE** I was so worried about omiyage. You don't need to be. Here's the low-down.

These are the presents you'll give when you arrive. It should be food.. The easiest thing to bring is individually wrapped candies for each teacher at each of your schools (about 50 each). Try for something local or interesting. I brought fruity tootsie rolls, which was fine. But when I went home for Christmas I brought dove chocolate and told them they could find a fortune on the wrapper. They loved it, and several teachers came to ask me what their fortune meant. Beware that chocolate might melt in the Toyama heat.

You should also bring a small gift for each of your supervisors (1 at each school), vice principals (2 at each school), and principals (1 at each school). This could be a magnet, a box of tea, coffee, a fancier food, etc. Whatever you choose, wrap it cutely! They'll probably be more hype about the wrapping than the actual item.

Some people say to bring gifts for all your English teachers, but I don't think it's necessary. Instead, you could bring a few extra just-in-case gifts for teachers or community members that do something to help you, or who you work closely with. For example, I gave one to a teacher who gave me a microwave when I arrived.

**SCHOOL** Bring anything you want about you or your country for your introduction lesson. Some people bring stickers, bribe candy, or a weird food from their country to make students taste.

I used a PowerPoint, and those without projector access usually print photos, so make sure you have pictures from your life on your laptop or on a flash drive.

That's all you really need.

**PERSONAL ITEMS** This is the gray(est) area and really depends on what you want and need.

**Toiletries.** I brought it all -- deodorant, toothpaste, shampoo, conditioner, tampons, etc. I recommend at least have travel sizes of these things because when you arrive, you're not going to want to hit up the drug store right away. That being said, you CAN buy ALL of this in Japan. However, I do prefer my American deodorant (old spice babyyyy) and toothpaste (fluoride babyyyy), and continue to use them (thanks to my sister visiting and re-stocking me). If you're also stuck on your countries brands, you could bring extra or have it shipped from home later.

**Medicine.** Don't bring medicines that are illegal in Japan. Do bring medicines that are legal in Japan because they're stronger, better, and cheaper than what you can find here. I brought a big bottle of Ibuprofen and allergy medicine and I am soooooo glad I did.

**Others.** Don't use precious space on giant heavy things you don't need (game consoles, one million books, DVD collection, etc.) Do bring some things that make you happy (special blanket, photos, small board game, one book, etc.)

That's it! I know things are crazy right now but try not to worry too much. If you forget something, it will be fine!

I can't wait to meet all of you! Please contact me if you have any questions.

Emmalee Manes

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# YOUR FIRST MONTH IN JAPAN

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Dear future-fellow Toyama JET, a hearty congratulations to you! You must be feeling that classic mix of excitement and nervousness. Hopefully you don't need any help feeling more excited, but maybe you do need some help feeling less nervous—that's what I'm here to do. Moving across the globe comes with its fair share of unknowns, so hopefully with the following details I'll be able to calm any anxieties you might have about your first month here.

To begin, let me say that the Toyama prefecture is home to some of the friendliest, most generous, and welcoming people I have ever met. When I arrived here two years ago, I was blown away by the sense of community between the JETs, and I quickly felt at home. So please, rest assured that if these welcome letters don't answer all of your questions, there will always be someone here who will be happy to help you after you've arrived.

With that said, let's tackle your first assignment that awaits you in Japan: **Tokyo Orientation**. These three days are meant to give you a more detailed overview of ALT expectations and advice. I won't go into detail about the content of the workshops, but rather remind you of some things to keep in mind while you're there.

**#1. Make sure you've sanctioned the contents of your two suitcases appropriately.** Remember, when you arrive in Tokyo, one of your suitcases will be immediately shipped ahead to your supervisor, so you'll need to make sure that your smaller suitcase has enough clothes and accoutrements for all your needs for your three days in Tokyo.

**#2. Technically, these days are your first days of work,** so please remember to act and dress professionally. Hitting the town at night can certainly be fun, but remember that you'll have to wake up early each day, and your body is probably dealing with jet-lag to boot. Acting like a zombie the next day isn't exactly a good impression, so if you do explore at night, please remember to not overdo it. It's very easy to visit Tokyo for a weekend from Toyama, so you can always come back again with more time in the future.

This brings us to your **first day in Toyama!** This is the day you'll fly out of Tokyo and meet representatives from your school at the airport. Most likely, this will be your supervisor, but I've heard of instances where other English teachers will meet you instead. In any case, you'll accomplish a lot of errands today. Ideally, your supervisor will shuttle you around on all the important errands you'll need to complete to start your life in Toyama. These errands should include: **getting your residency card, setting up your bank account, switching you to a Japanese phone, paying your first month's rent, and giving you your *hanko*** (kind of like a stamp/seal you'll use as a signature for official documents). If there are other things you'd like help taking care of, now is the perfect time to ask your supervisor. For example, if you'd like help shopping for house supplies or groceries, don't be afraid to ask!

The next day, you should be heading to your base school for your first day of work. Be sure to have your ***omiyage*** (souvenirs from home) ready. These should be something representative from your home, and it's okay if they're cheap. For example, I brought pencils and magnets from my university, and they were well received. Regarding quantity, it might be hard to know how many teachers your school has, but I'd suggest bringing about 30-40 of something, with a little extra-special something for your principal and supervisor. Also, I recommend preparing a **self-introduction speech**, in the event you're asked to give one to the teachers there. This can be very brief, and even if you don't speak Japanese, if you throw in a few phrases like *dōzo-yoroshiku-onegaishimasu* ("Nice to meet you" / "I'm looking forward to working with you"), they'll appreciate that and you should be fine.

Since you'll be arriving in August, the schools will be on summer vacation for the rest of the month. This is great news, since there won't be any classes, which means you'll have plenty of time to settle in to your position and get acquainted with the school. If you're wondering what you should be doing during this "free" time, I have some suggestions.

**#1. Talk to the other English teachers (JTEs).** If your supervisor isn't one of the heads of the English department, find that person and discuss your role as an ALT in the classroom for each grade. Find out what textbooks they use, what they would like you to prepare for each class in general, etc. With the whole month free of classes, you should be able to prepare for the term ahead pretty well. Also, to get a better grasp of the students' English ability, I recommend asking if you could sit in on one of the classes.

**#2. Prepare your self-intro lesson.** Regardless of what the JTEs want you to do in each class, chances are extremely high you will do a self-intro lesson with each class. This lesson should introduce who you are and your home country to the class. Remember that you'll need to keep the students engaged, so only talking at them will put some of them to sleep. I recommend using lots of visual aids, or to incorporate some sort of game into the lesson. For example, I had them guess facts about me (i.e. "What activity did I do in high school? a. Sports / b. Photography club / c. Drama club / d. Band"), and then briefly explain about each answer.

**#3. Explore the school.** Get to know your surroundings! Find out what kinds of equipment you'll have access to in your classroom(s). Is there some kind of public "English Board" you can use? Try to find where the vending machines, the cafeteria, and the break room are. During your wanderings around the school grounds, you'll probably run into students doing club activities too, so feel free to say hi and start getting to know them! They'll probably be pretty excited to see you, too.

During August, you'll also attend Toyama Orientation with your supervisor. This is a 3-day event where you'll meet many other JETs from the prefecture, and also get some more in-depth information about school goings-on. You'll learn about how to take vacation days, when the first *enkai* (work party) is, information on income taxes, and more. On the third day, you'll actually be climbing Mt. Tate with most of the JETs in the prefecture, which is a great time to get to know everyone.

Finally, a word about the weather: Toyama summers are HOT and HUMID. When I walked out of the airport with my supervisor to run our errands, I was already sweating through my shirt and suit. So, please ready a small hand towel to wipe yourself down with! This might sound odd, but these are actually very common among Toyama-ites. Drink lots of water and don't hold back on your air-conditioner!

With that, I think you should be ready for Toyama! Honestly, everyone here was—and has continued to be since my arrival 2 years ago—exceedingly helpful and friendly to me. I'm certain it will be the same when you get here! If you want to go exploring around your new home (which of course I recommend), you shouldn't have any trouble finding a partner in crime to do it with.

Safe travels, and I look forward to meeting you!

Anthony Rinaldi (Oregon, USA)

Toyama City

Toyama Higashi Senior High School



## MAKING A (GOOD) FIRST IMPRESSION

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What you get out of JET will largely be a function of the relationships you build and maintain in Toyama. These include both your relationships with your fellow foreigners, with the Japanese community, and, very importantly, with your school. In order to ingratiate yourself to your community, it is important to build strong foundations with good first impressions. Luckily, this is not actually very hard to do.

Making a good impression in the foreign community is easy. You share a language, and likely similar interests with a lot of people here. Check the community facebook page, introduce yourself, and go to events put on by AJET and your regional representative. Don't be a jerk, and don't complain more than everyone else is. You'll make friends quickly. The meat of the advice I will give is concerned with making good impressions with your coworkers and with your students. However, there is one point that I want to make.

**Be yourself.** This is very cliché. However, it is also very important, not just because people should like you for who you are, but because you won't be able to pretend that you are someone else for very long. For example, imagine you are only mildly interested in sports. If you present yourself as someone who loves sports, and plays them all the time, because you want to fit in, you may find yourself in a situation where you are expected to play sports with coworkers and students all of the time. This will leave you miserable, and lead to an awkward time of entangling yourself from invitations and expectations. On the other hand, if you pretend to not really like anime, even though you love it, because you don't want to be seen as a "typical foreigner" then you will miss out on conversations and bonding that you might have had with coworkers and students who share your hobby. Sincerity is probably the best approach to most situations.

On to more specific tips:

### Tips for bonding with coworkers

- 1. Look the part.** Wear a nice suit when you first get to school. Then, figure out what everyone else is wearing, and dress to that level of formality.
- 2. Go to enkais.** Enkai, Japanese drinking parties are chances to bond with your coworkers. It is certainly your decision if you want to go to these, but I would definitely at least go to initial ones. This shows people that you are interested in meeting them. Be open minded about food. If you don't feel like drinking, no one will care. A lot of teachers will have to drive home afterwards, so you won't be the only one not drinking. Also, while enkais might be expensive, your school might have a "club" you can join, which will reduce or eliminate the price for parties in exchange for comparatively cheap monthly fees.
- 3. Learn basic Japanese.** You don't have to be fluent, but learn things like "ohayou gozaimasu" and "shitsureishimasu." People get used to certain actions or phrases eliciting a response. Imagine how you feel when people you say "Good morning" to someone, and they do not respond. It is unsettling. However, keep in mind that you do not have to present yourself as a master right away. If you struggle through the phrases, that is evidence that you are at least trying to learn.
- 4. Don't oversell yourself.** If you don't speak Japanese fluently, don't tell people you do. If you don't understand everything that's going on at school, or how to plan a lesson, don't pretend you do. The

respect you might initially garner for your feigned competence will be overshadowed by the frustration people will feel when you fall short of expectations.

**5. Let people teach you things.** People are going to want to teach you a lot of things about Japan and Japanese culture. Even if you are already well versed in how to use chopsticks, or a particular aspect of Toyama Japanese, if they seem adamant about teaching you something, just go along with it. Teachers might, at first, be at a loss for how to interact with you, or what to talk about. When they teach you how to say “sumimasen” you can use it as a jumping off point to ask about other grammar points you are having trouble with, and to make a friend at the same time.

**6. Bond with students.** Your coworkers are teachers. For the most part, teachers get into teaching because they like children. The best way to endear yourself to teachers is to be kind to students, and to prove to them that you are an asset to their education, who cares about them as people.

In general, you want to structure your initial interactions with teachers to portray yourself as someone who knows that they still have a lot to learn (because you do) but who is willing to improve, and who is enthusiastic to be teaching at their school.

#### **Tips for bonding with students**

- 1. Greet them.** ALTs are often advised to be “Genki” a Japanese term which means “healthy” and “energetic.” It implies that we should exhibit a high degree of outgoingness. I think that this advice isn’t necessarily great. Many of us are not particularly extroverted, and being “genki” is not in our natures. This is fine. However, you should definitely at least *greet* students in a way that shows you are happy to see them.
- 2. Remember them.** More than anything, the most important part of bonding with students is getting to know them as people. Ask about them, and then remember details about them that you can refer back to in future conversations (especially their names). For example, if they say they want to be nurses, and they later say that their favorite class is biology, reference the pertinence of their favorite subject to their career interests. That shows that you care about them enough to recall information.
- 3. Ask them advice.** One thing I like to do is to point to a vending machine, and then ask students which drink I should have. It’s a little thing, but it makes them feel respected and important when you ask for their advice. Ask them about things they know; like things to do in Toyama, or good restaurants, and then follow up on their advice.
- 4. Talk to them.** Just is implied by the above three answers, but it’s important. Talk to your students when you get the chance. If they understand English, you should use English; but don’t feel too self-conscious about using Japanese, if you speak it. Building a relationship with students will benefit their English more, in the long term, than limiting your conversations to what they can speak about in English.
- 5. Be patient.** They are children, after all. They might ask rude questions, or sleep in class. Don’t let it get to you too much, and don’t give up on them. On the other hand, don’t do them the disservice of expecting less of them than they can give.

Overall, if you want to make a good impression on students, just treat them with respect and compassion. The same is true for bonding with coworkers. Japan is full of great people for you to meet. Don’t be a jerk, learn some of the language, take an interest in the people around you, and you’ll be fine. Have fun!

William Leroux

# SELF-INTRODUCTION: HOW TO SURVIVE YOUR FIRST CLASS

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You made it. You are here. Here on the first day of classes. You look professional. You went through the introduction ceremony. You have met your coworkers. You are in the classroom. It is the first time to meet the students. Now, you might be thinking, “How the heck is this gonna go?” Well, you are not the first one to think that and you will not be the last. If you are freaking out about how to make a good first impression on the students, have no fear! For here is a list for you to look through on how to make the perfect self-introduction presentation.

## Tip #1: **Make it genuine.**

The students can smell BS and it’s not a good way to start out. Besides the students are honestly curious about who you are and want to know about you. Something that you might think is boring about you might be amazing to them. Show them the real you.

## Tip #2: **A picture is worth a thousand words.**

You can explain yourself as many times as you want but it will not have the same captivation as pictures. Students will want to see picture from your home, family, friends, food, everything. And if you want some extra brownie points throw in gifs.

## Tip #3: **Show your roots.**

No, not your hair. The students will want to know where you are from. Gather as much information about your home as you can. What kind of food do you eat? What can you see? What is your home famous for? It doesn’t have to just be about your home, either. What about your family? What are they like? How many siblings to you have? Do you have pets? Students will want to hear all about it.

## Tip #4: **Games!**

One of the best ways to get students on your side is through games. After I talked about myself, I included a quiz game about my home state at the end. Other games that could be fun are riddles, three hint quiz, true or false; there are many options.

## Tip #5: **Spell it out.**

Sometimes you have to make it painfully obvious of what you mean for students to understand you. What do I mean by that? I suggest labeling pictures, writing sentence points, and miming out what you mean. And the good ole’ “Do you understand?” can get them on the right track.

## Tip #6: **Keep it simple.**

Remember, these students are still learning English so it is best to keep it as simple as possible. Students should be able to look at your slide and understand it right away. If there is a word you think might be too difficult to explain and you have the ability, put the Japanese translation down. If your presentation is complicated, they won’t listen.

## Tip #7: **Become Question Master.**

You want to keep them engaged, right? Ask questions through-out your presentation. Ask them such things such as “What do you think?” or “Do you know this?” Make sure to leave some time after your presentation for the students to ask you questions as well. And a warning, you will be asked strange or personal questions. It ranges from the usual, “Do you have a boyfriend/girlfriend?” to “You’re American, why aren’t you fat?” Be mentally prepared when you give and receive questions.

**Tip #8: Worksheets.**

Let’s start off with your new best friend. Always a useful tool to make sure students are listening; plus, it’s good reading and writing practice. You can make it a quick five question worksheet. Or in case you will not have access to a working computer to have a multiple-choice quiz sheet for the students to work on and you can reveal the answers afterwards. I suggest putting a little section on the worksheet for them to write a short self-introduction. You want to get to know them too, right?

**Tip #9: Bribery.**

JK, but not really. It is common for ALTs to give out stickers to students who answer questions or engage with the ALT. Some schools even have sticker worksheets for the students. Bring some stickers from home with some English on it or buy some from Daiso in Japan.

**Tip #10: The more the merrier.**

It is best to be prepared for any situation and to make several presentations. I recommend making a long (30 minutes) and short (10 minutes) PowerPoint presentation. You won’t know what your JTEs will want so it is best to be prepared for whatever. Make a non-computer friendly presentation, too.

**Tip #11: Prepare for “It’s not working” moments.**

So, this can and does happen. I cannot recommend enough to test out everything on the equipment that you have well in advance to your lesson. Also, have a back-up plan just in case the computer is down or any other unforeseen complications.

**Tip #12: Relax and have fun.**

At the end of the day, it is just a regular class. Not to mention you will be doing this presentation for at least two weeks so you will get the hang of it in no time. Have fun with it and the students will follow suit.

Well, there you have it. This is just the basic guide for your presentation but I hope that this has been useful. So, settle your nerves and you will be fine! Best of luck to you all! And Congratulations and welcome to Toyama!

Devon Redlin

## IT'S ELEMENTARY, MY DEAR WATSON!

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Welcome to Toyama! Congratulations on getting one of the best placements in Japan. This is for the new ALTs who have been told they will be working with elementary schools. Maybe you just have one. Maybe you have four or more. Either way, here is some advice on how to make the best working with the little ones.

### **Think of your favorite things**

During the first couple weeks of school or longer, you will be introducing yourself to your new schools. Even though the kids might not be as upfront with their excitement as kids from other countries, they have been waiting for this moment to meet you. Usually, children want a way to connect with their new teachers. When creating your self-introduction presentation, think of what interesting facts about you that would intrigue an elementary school student. What's your favorite color? What sport do you like? What cartoon character is your favorite? What animal do you like? What's your favorite TV show? What's your favorite food? What's your favorite book? Believe it or not, I had some difficulties coming up with answers to these simple questions, but having an answer is better than "I don't know." Remember to keep your presentation in easy English. This is not just for the students, but also for the Home Room Teachers (HRTs) so they can translate. Speak slowly and clearly. If you have anything that you can bring that you don't mind the students holding, bring it. Remember to smile.

### **Remember when you were in elementary school**

Ask yourself, when you were an elementary school student, what were some characteristics of your favorite teacher. Were they someone who smiled at you in the hallways and always said hello? Were they someone who would play sports with you after school? Were they someone who would help you one-on-one with a task? Think of those characteristics and how you can become that teacher for your future students. You don't have to try to be someone who you are not. Just try to be the best version of yourself for the young ones.

### **Your work schedule**

I'm going to be honest. I have no clue what your schedule will be like.

My schedule in Kurobe looks VERY different from other ES ALTs in the prefecture. Your Board of Education will give you your schedule. Your contract will explain what your hours are. Most likely 8:30 to 4:15. Try to get to work at least 10 minutes early. You most likely will be using *Hi, Friends!* unless your BoE has its own curriculum. You may only work with 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders weekly and the lower grades once a month. You may have 3<sup>rd</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> grade once a week and only 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> once a month. You may only see one of your schools every couple months. My advice is: don't worry too much about this now. Everything will be

explained to you once you get to your city. Just make sure you have a suit jacket available for the first day and opening ceremony. You can change to more comfortable clothes after the ceremonies are over. For elementary school, it is ok to wear sportswear as long as it's not raggedy.

**I don't speak Japanese. How am I going to remember all my students' names? How will I be able to bond with them?**

I would be very impressed if you remembered everyone's name. Try to look at their name tags as much as you can, but don't beat yourself up if you forget. Give them high fives. Say hello to them in the hallways. Ask them simple questions for them to practice outside the classroom. Cheer them on during their Sports Day. If you're sporty, join them for a game of basketball. Ask someone if you could attend one of their club activities. Acknowledge them if you see them around town. A smile goes a long way here.

**Things to remember**

Don't be nervous. They're just little human beings.

Be flexible. Schedules change ALL THE TIME.

Be a good representative of your home country.

Learn greetings to say in Japanese to your co-workers.

Take pictures of your family and around your hometown before you leave.

Understand that you are seen as a teacher and should behave as such, even outside the school.

Ask your fellow ALTs for help and advice if you need any.

That's all the advice I have for now. I'm sure you will have more questions as your departure date draws near. Please feel free to email me any questions you may have or say hello during Toyama Orientation.

Again, congratulations of your placement and good luck with everything!

Samantha McGuire

Sakurai ES

Ogyu ES

Wakaguri ES

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## INTRODUCTION TO JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL LIFE!

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Hello, all. Welcome to the Toyama JET family!

Life in a brand new country can be extremely difficult. I am here to give you a few tips on how to make your stay easy, rewarding, and fun by sharing with you my experience as a junior high school ALT. With the right mindset and information, I think your life here will be like early April breeze blowing on *sakura* trees! Let's get started.

### **Daily routine.**

#### **8:00-8:15**

This is the time period when all the students should have arrived at school. However, there will always be students who are late. Try to be punctual yourself.

#### **8:25-8:30**

Staffs of each grade will hold their own meetings to make announcements or discuss curriculum and/or events. Some schools might require their ALTs to participate in this meeting, so make sure you find out if you are expected to be present. For me, I was never asked to join these meetings.

#### **8:30-8:40**

Homeroom teachers go to their classrooms and hold a meeting. You can do some last minute preparation during this time, but be sure to leave enough time to communicate with the teachers that you are having first period with.

#### **8:45**

The first period starts. There are four 50 minute-periods in the morning, with 10 minute breaks in between each. The fourth period ends at 12:35. Sometimes the schools run on a shortened schedule due to events, and classes are 45 minutes each. Check with your school or JTEs on which days are shortened so you can prepare your lesson plans accordingly.

#### **12:35**

Lunch starts. Since my school is huge, I eat lunch in the staff room with teachers who do not have a homeroom class. Homeroom teachers eat with their classes. You can ask to join students for lunch, but not every school has this tradition so try to be understanding. You are also welcome to bring your own lunch if you don't feel like Japanese food every day or have allergies. You will be asked at the beginning of the year if you would like to have school lunch. For me, the school lunch is cheap, tasty, and nutritionally balanced. I recommend it.

#### **1:35**

The fifth period starts. There are generally two periods in the afternoon.

#### **3:30-3:45**

During these 15 minutes, all the teachers and students clean the school. You're welcome to help, but with everything in Japan, always ask for permission first.

#### **3:45-4:00**

Another homeroom meeting is held to sum up the day and make announcements about the following day.

#### **4:10**

Club activities start. Your work ends at 4:15 but you are welcome to stay and participate in club activities. Again, it might be wise to ask club advisers for permission first. Clubs usually run until 6:00 in the summer and 5:15-5:30 in the winter. As for me, I am heavily involved in school clubs and will usually stay until after club activities end. The staffs at your school will probably appreciate your efforts, but don't feel obligated to stay if you are busy.

### **Team teaching**

Junior high school team teaching is quite different from that of elementary school. Since you will be teaching all three grades, it is very important that you have a good command of the contents of all three textbooks.

Depending on the JTE, your role might change. Some JTEs expect ALTs to be in charge of the lesson plans, while others will just have you join their classes and be a human tape recorder. Personally, I find coming up with your own plan to be more interesting for both you and the students. Students get tired of their everyday textbook lessons, so a change of pace can be helpful, and that's where you come in. Content wise, some JTEs would like you to have more verbal communication with the students, and some will prefer reading and writing exercises instead. Either way, if you are given the chance to make lesson plans, try to incorporate fun and interactive games. I tend to make game activities focused on reading and writing, but again, ask your JTEs what they would like.

As ALTs, it is a good idea to be flexible. After you plan your schedule, check with your JTEs to see if it is convenient for them. If not, then try your best to work around their schedule. You are expected to teach on average 3-4 classes a day, so keep that in mind when planning.

### **Teaching and life in general**

There will be bad days when classes are total disasters, and there will be times when your relations with coworkers or students take a bad turn. In these cases, I find it most helpful to stay positive and optimistic. Keep in mind that you are representing your country and working as a professional at a public school. No matter what happens, be positive and professional. Did I mention stay positive?

Life is already hard enough working in a foreign country, and will only worsen if you let something at work get to you. If there is a problem with the students, you can ask their homeroom teachers to discipline them. Even if something turns personal, try to be lenient as they are only minors. With co-workers it can be a bit more complicated, but I have found "time" to be the most helpful thing when being optimistic fails. Let time wash away all the negativities.

The most important thing is probably BE YOURSELF while also being professional. I think that all JET participants are hardworking and highly qualified people who have goals, so being yourself can bring out the best of you. Your good qualities will automatically translate to the students and coworkers. Good luck!

Michael Sun

Yoshino JHS and related ES

[ac090887@yahoo.com](mailto:ac090887@yahoo.com)



## SENIOR HIGH LIFE

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Hey new Toyama person! Welcome to this prefecture. I hope you enjoy the mountains and snow and strange street sprinklers and great sea food and fun community. You've got all of that in store for you and much more.

If you are reading this, I assume you are going to be a Senior High School teacher or are just overly curious. Either way, you are in for a great time. I came into JET hoping to work with little kids and by my first week of High School, I realized I wouldn't want to be teaching any other age range. The kids you teach will have strong opinions, personalities and a huge range of interests. It is your job to get them to open up and help them enjoy their time in High School as well as improve their English communication ability as much as you can.

That being said, your individual experience is going to vary wildly from everyone else's. The amount of classes you teach can vary from three total per week up to twenty plus. On average, most people teach around fifteen a week, it seems.

Furthermore, the goals of your school are going to be quite different as well. Broadly speaking, most Senior High Schools are going to be aiming to get their students to pass the college entrance exams. For some high academic schools, this will be the sole focus. Classes will be taught rigidly and will not divert from the textbook due to a lack of time. With schools that do not prioritize college entrance exams, it seems like more opportunities for variation and fun kind of classes open up, though overall participation may go down. My school, for example, is a big, private, sports school so my students tend to be very energetic, though their overall English ability is somewhat low. Regardless of where you wind up working, remember that your situation is going to be unique and to read the surroundings for yourself.

Typical work days are going to be from 8:00ish to 4:00ish. In my situation, there are seven periods everyday plus a lunch and cleaning time. I tend to have between two to four break periods a day to

prepare and talk to the JTE's that I work with. You will also occasionally be asked to work on weekends or after your contractual time ends, but you should be reimbursed that time as an elective day or time off.

Speaking of time off, there are roughly five large breaks in the school year. The first you will experience will be winter vacation. This typically starts around the 25<sup>th</sup> of December and lasts until the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of January. This is time off for everyone, and you can take more vacation time if you want to travel. Next will be spring break. During spring break the kids are going to be out of school but, most likely, you will have to show up and sit in your desk. It is very boring; bring a book or something else to occupy yourself with. After that is golden week, a collection of national holidays near the end of April or beginning of May. This is one of the biggest vacation times in Japan so nearly everyone will be off taking some kind of trip or vacation. Next is summer break. Again, desk sitting without students or work. Finally, another collection of holidays is called Silver Week and that occurs in September sometimes. It gets a little confusing.

The times when you don't have students are going to be prime travel times for you to use your vacation days. Typically schools will not have any problem with you using your vacation time when students are not in.

I hope you enjoy your time in Japan, Toyama, and your return to High School. No two schools are going to be the same so enjoy learning and adapting to whatever you are thrown into. Remember that you are not alone and you can always reach out to any of your other JET compatriots. Feel free to contact me with any questions that you have.

Good Luck!

Ryan Riches

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Toyama Daiichi High School

## TEACHING ADULT LEARNERS

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Dear Incoming Toyama JETs,

First and foremost, allow me to take this opportunity to congratulate you on your position on the JET Programme. Though Toyama is one of Japan's lesser known prefectures, the surrounding natural environs, welcoming local community, and delicious regional cuisine make it one of the best placements to bag!

I am currently a third year CIR working at Takaoka City Hall. Though my tenure on JET will end this August, one of my fondest memories of my time at work and on the programme is having the opportunity to teach a group of adults English conversation. Unlike ALTs who teach in classrooms inside elementary schools, junior high schools or senior high schools, teaching adults provides you a sense of freedom and liberation. There are no textbooks. There is no syllabus. It all comes down to you and what you want to teach.

During my three years on the JET Programme, I taught an 8-10 week course of English conversation twice a year. I was responsible for teaching an introductory, beginners, intermediate, and advanced conversation class. Given that most adults have long had English grammar points drilled into minds since their high schools day, I decided that I wanted to better utilise the class by giving all of the participants an opportunity to use the English they had learned over the years through group discussions for higher levels and situational learning for lower levels.

I enjoyed both the group discussion lessons and situational learning lessons for very different reasons. During the intermediate classes, I wanted the participants to feel excited when discussing weekly topics with their classmates and tried to present them with situations which would stimulate their desire to use English and their imaginations. Every week, I would present the class with a situation. This varied from becoming sales assistants in a travel agency designing a bespoke tour for foreigners, to becoming matchmakers reading through imaginary dating profiles trying to find me a wife. I found that bizarre yet relatable lesson materials often got the participants animated in conversation and laughing along as they verbalized their thoughts and feelings.

In regard to the advanced level classes, similar to the intermediate English conversation class, I wanted the participants to engage in group discussion. However, the topics which I set were often discussions which had no right or wrong answer and required a lot of further thought. I found that [bbc.com](http://bbc.com), [japantimes.com](http://japantimes.com), [japantoday.com](http://japantoday.com), [breakingnewsenglish.com](http://breakingnewsenglish.com) were excellent sites for finding resources and lesson materials. Furthermore, I would often split the class into two groups and have each side debate for or against a particular topic. This would force participants to argue an opinion which they may not necessarily agree with personally. However, in doing so, this would further develop their debate and discussion skills, along with their English ability.

I found that group discussion was a little too difficult for the lower level conversation and instead found situation learning far more effective and enjoyable. During the customary self-introduction lessons, I asked the participants what their motives were for taking part in the course. The most received response was learning enough English to get by when travelling overseas. I took inspiration from this and decided to model the eight week course like the class was on a trip overseas. Participants were taught English they are likely to hear when reserving/changing a hotel reservation, checking-in, dining out, and purchasing souvenirs and how to respond appropriately.

Finally, the most important thing to remember when teaching adults is to have fun. I found that if the teacher doesn't find the topic stimulating or the lesson enjoyable, neither will the participants. Within this type of English conversation class, you are able to inject your own personality into the course and get to know all of the participants on a level which goes beyond the student-teacher relationship.

Once again, congratulations on your position on the JET Programme, the application process is finally over and the fun is about to begin!!

Nick Lavin

# TEACHING AT A SPECIAL NEEDS SCHOOL

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Congrats on making it to JET and welcome to #amazingtoyama!! And now, you're also one of the lucky few that get to work in a special needs school or a *Shien Gakko*!

The well-known JET mantra of ESID (Every Situation is Different) never rung truer for me than when I teach at my special needs school. My school has elementary, junior high AND senior high divisions and I see all types of students here. Some students are wheelchair dependent. Some have limited motor skills and may be non-verbal. Some have serious medical conditions. Some have varying degrees of learning disabilities and just need to be in a class with fewer students. There are also other special needs schools that cater strictly for students with visual impairments, hearing impairments, etc.

The teaching/teacher situation can also be very varied. Class sizes are small ranging from 1 to 10 students. I teach some classes with a JTE. I also teach some classes with (sometimes multiple) non-JTE teachers who're on duty with the students at the time of my lesson. Note that while non-JTEs MAY not speak much/any English; they're amazingly helpful and friendly. Sometimes a parent of a student or two might be in class. This is usually the case if the student has a medical need that only the parent can be responsible for at the school.

Prior to working at Toyama Sogo Shien Gakko (my special school), I had very little experience in working with students with special needs. If this is your situation, you might be understandably nervous. However, I would like to reassure you that teachers at these schools (both JTEs and non-JTEs) will be there to support and help you.

This brings me to this list of things you can do to help you help these students better:

## 1. ASK

There must be a lot of things on your mind at this point. Make a list of it and organize a list of questions you might have. Ask your teachers!

Here are some questions I've asked that helped me a LOT:

# What can/can't the students do?

# Is there anything I should be aware about when teaching this student?

(Some students can't handle loud noises or have a history of being bullied etc)

# Can I have a students' name/teachers' name list in English?

# I have this lesson idea, do you think it's within the student's abilities?

# What would you like the student to achieve through lessons with me/us?

**Talk to your predecessor**, and if possible try to ask for the kind of disabilities the students might have. Once you've done that, ask Lord Google for more information.

Also this handy link: <http://genkienglish.net/specialneedseducation.htm>

## **2. BE FLEXIBLE AND WORK THOSE IMPROVISATION CHOPS!**

Get your yoga gear on, do a goood mental stretch and whip something out from that Mary Poppins bag of yours. Things are always HAPPENING in my school.

Sometimes, in all the hurry, your supervisor might forget to tell you that your classes for the next week are all cancelled! Or, you might be asked to teach a different class for 1<sup>st</sup> period, because the original class of 3 is all down with a cold! You may not have a textbook to follow (very possible)!

Sounds like a tough job, but it gets super fun! I now have a collection of games, children's books, stuffed toys, small instruments and music videos of nursery rhymes (on my laptop) that are good to go at a moment's notice. Make use of whatever you have and go with the flow.

## **3. STAY HEALTHY**

Keep track of your physical and mental well-being. Special needs can sometimes be a bit of a physical and emotional rollercoaster. Teaching elementary, junior high and senior high students, all in a day, can be physically exhausting. Eat a good breakfast and lunch because you'll most definitely need it! Take that rain check if you're sick. You do you.

While for most part special school is full of happy energy, there are situations that can weigh you down. There have been students who have passed on because of health complications. I sometimes come to know about some unfortunate circumstances surrounding some students. Some days, you might wonder why you are singing "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" to a non-verbal student who is wheelchair dependent, with severe learning disabilities. Make sure you have people you can talk to on the difficult days. **It's ok to feel** and you should have a safe space to express those feelings.

The bottom line is all these students have the right to education as much as the next person does. You are a window to the world outside; something they may never have the chance to experience otherwise. Likewise, there are SO many life lessons you will learn from these AMAZING people and you DO come out a kinder person. Love and Life.

For more info: <https://iggyinjapan.wordpress.com/> OR [a.yagnya@gmail.com](mailto:a.yagnya@gmail.com)

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## TEACHING AT MULTIPLE SCHOOLS

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Welcome to the JET Program! You probably have a ton of questions as you prepare to jump into this new experience. If, like many ALTs, you are assigned to more than one school, I want to give you some advice as someone who juggled four schools throughout my time here.

It may sound intimidating to have to keep track multiple schools' worth of students, lesson plans, and team teachers, but if you stay organized and follow a few guidelines it's really not a big deal. Here are a few tips for keeping things manageable:

**Keep separate notebooks for each school.** In each of my four color-coded notebooks, I have my yearly class schedule, my lesson plans for the upcoming week, and notes on how each class went. Recording information like this for each school in separate notebooks is way easier than cramming it all into one, even though it might feel intuitive to have all of it together in one place. Doing it this way, you can avoid confusion and carry less with you each day.

**Know what supplies each school does and doesn't have.** All of my elementary schools have an area where teaching materials are kept: flash cards, picture books, dice, games, et cetera are often kept somewhere in the staff room. Not all of your schools will have the same exact stuff, however. You don't want to walk into school B assuming they have the same game cards as school A, only to find they're missing what you need. It's a good idea to make sure the school has what you need before the next time you come in, and make note of what materials you need to prepare.

**Reuse lesson plans.** Just because you're rotating among a bunch of different schools doesn't mean you have to come up with a completely new curriculum for each one. I suggest you use the same lesson plans at different schools. But! This does mean you'll need to make adjustments according to the types of students at each school and varying class sizes. Doing this gives you the chance to experiment and see what works and what doesn't with your lessons.

**Get to know your coworkers!** If you visit two or more schools, you'll be working alongside potentially dozens of teachers throughout the school year. Try to get to know them, even if you only work with them once a week or less. It makes the team teaching relationship more productive, and it's generally a good thing to have a good relationship with coworkers, right?

Don't sweat it if you end up at multiple schools. I've actually enjoyed doing it, because the variety every day keeps things more interesting than I think they would've been if I worked at only one school the entire time. Safe travels, and enjoy your time on JET!

Simon Robinson  
Nyuzen Nishi Junior High School  
simonrobinson42@gmail.com

## TEACHING A SPECIAL NEEDS CLASS

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First of all, welcome to Toyama! You're going to have an amazing time here! There's so much to see and do, and the community is incredibly supportive. We look forward to meeting you. If you're reading this letter there's a good chance that you find yourself in the same position I did about a year ago. The JET application and preparation process is intense, and now that you're placed there's a new potential hurdle in front of you- I had absolutely no experience teaching special needs students before this.

When I was informed I would have special needs classes at my base school and a special needs school outside of that, it was overwhelming. However, after a year of teaching these classes I have found it to be an incredibly rewarding and enriching part of my experience here. This was possible only because of the support and advice I received when I first came here, so I'd like to pass along some of what worked for me. As you have no doubt heard countless times by now, every experience is different, so I am going to focus less on exact advice and more on general ways to make a special needs class work.

First, learn your students. Special needs is a very broad category. It is entirely possible for you to have students with learning disabilities and students with physical disabilities in the same classroom. They will have different needs both in terms of the materials you make and the lessons you plan. You will not be told what diagnosis your students have, but you should be prepared for approaching the material in a few different ways. And as you learn what your students need it's a good idea to be ready to adapt materials to those needs. This is easiest if you have a smaller class, but even in a large class it will benefit you to get a sense of exactly what it is your students need to best facilitate learning!

If you get to set the pace of the lessons try to keep the language you teach simple and functional. The advice I got was to try to stick with useful and practical English. Things like self-introduction, the alphabet, numbers, and useful words for describing things around them. There are two major benefits to this approach. First, it is useful for all students of all different learning types and needs to have these tools under their belt. A simple lesson that challenges your students and ends with them being able to say their name to another person is a success, even if you could have maybe covered more ground with some of your students using a more complicated lesson.



That said games are your friend. As with any other lessons, keeping your students engaged will make your job way easier and ensure they are retaining more English. The general flow of one of my lessons is to think of a type of grammar or vocabulary I want to introduce, introduce that through songs or discussion, and then go into some sort of long form activity. Sometimes these activities are more like bookwork, but usually it is a game where students are able to use this language in a fun way! You will find that this is similar to how it will work in any of your other classes.

Often times there is a different and less clear curriculum for special needs students. This is often very freeing! It gives you a lot more room to be creative, and if you see something isn't working you have more time to iron it out or work with your students. The other side of that though is that you will want to try to keep your lessons flowing naturally into each other. Try to teach vocabulary in one lesson that will be useful for the next and build slowly to that. The best way to handle this is to pick a theme and plan to cover that for several lessons.

The single most important thing though is to relax and have fun! There is a lot of pressure when you find out that you're going to be teaching special needs students, but these classes have the potential to be incredible. Just put in the work. Find out what all of your students need and make sure that you are giving them all something to get from your lessons. It won't be easy, but it will be totally worth it! I don't hesitate to say that my special needs classes have been one of my favorite experiences here. They take more thought at times, but the pay-off is always worth it.

If you want specific advice tailored to your situation, please feel free to reach out to me. Welcome to Toyama!

Brandon Johnsen

Fushiki Junior High School

[bjohnsen1992@gmail.com](mailto:bjohnsen1992@gmail.com)

# YOUR GO-TO FOR SELF-CARE AND MENTAL HEALTH

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Let's keep this simple.

Living in a new country is exciting, but can also be challenging. Here are some tips in no order on how to take care of yourself and your mental health.

**Let go of any expectations that you may have. Any experiences you have had in Japan before may help you adjust, but will not be the same as the one you are about the experience.**

**Learn to be flexible.**

**Learn to laugh at yourself.**

**Learn to let petty things go.**

**If you are on medication, TAKE YOUR MEDICATION. There is absolutely no shame in it.**

**Go outside and talk to people.**

**Seriously, go outside. Take a walk. Enjoy that Toyama nature.**

**Eat healthy most of the time.**

**If your weight changes, be kind to yourself. Your body needs to adjust to its new environment.**

**Drink lots of water.**

**Moisturize.**

**Accept that you are a foreigner and you will always be a foreigner.**

**Don't ignore your fellow expats. They are sometimes the only ones who can understand your culture shock and homesickness.**

**Learn something new that you've always wanted to do, but thought that you were too old to start.**

**Learn survival Japanese if you don't know any already. Start with hiragana and katakana.**

**Befriend your local convenience store employees.**

**Greet the elderly woman tending to her garden in the morning.**

**Understand that alcohol is a depressant and can worsen anxiety.**

**Keep in touch with your family and friends, but avoid spending hours on social media.**

**Understand whatever you may have going on back home is not going to disappear.**

**Don't be afraid to contact someone if you need help.**

**Try to keep your apartment clean.**

**Know when to say no when you feel you have enough going on and need a rest.**

**Connect with those who will understand your identity and any struggles you may experience while living in Japan.**

**Make the most out of your new position by doing extracurricular activities with your students or any community outreach/volunteering.**

These are just a few tips. You probably have read more in the other letters you received.

If you need additional help, here are some resources:

### **JET Mental Health Counselling Assistance Programme**

With the aim of enhancing mental health support for JET participants, CLAIR offers the JET Mental Health Counselling Assistance Programme. This programme provides a partial subsidy (50%, up to ¥20,000 per year) for counselling costs incurred through consultation with mental health professionals in Japan not covered by health insurance.

### **AJET Peer Support Group**

PSG is a confidential and anonymous resource provided by JETs, for JETs. The volunteers are trained to listen and support callers through a wide spectrum of challenges, and put them in touch with the appropriate resources. PSG operates from 8pm to 7am, 365 days a year, and is the only overnight support service designed to serve JETs nationwide. Contact us at 050-5534-5566, on Skype at "AJETPSG", or check out the website at [www.ajetpsg.com](http://www.ajetpsg.com)

### **Prefectural Advisor (PA)**

Our PA in Toyama is Elise Reller. You should be receiving a letter from her with her contact information and her role in supporting you.

Samantha McGuire

## DON'T GET FRUSTRATED AT WORK AND LIFE

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Living in a new place, spending seven hours in a building with virtual strangers, called to do tasks without yet knowing the way everything works- it can be all too easy to fall into a pit of pessimism. If your Japanese level isn't quite up to par, it can be even more difficult to work with your coworkers.

For ALTs, teachers might ask you to do nothing but have the students repeat vocab words after you, making you a glorified tape recorder. You might have some great ideas for the class, but because you're the new blood, it can be hard to offer suggestions without seeming rude. With all these challenges, you might start feeling like there's no way to overcome them, or that there's no point in trying. I'm here to tell you there is definitely a reason to overcome this feeling, and there's always something you can do.

I came to Japan never having taught before, and got more worried the closer September loomed. I'm an elementary school ALT. It didn't take too long to realize that the Japanese teacher was in charge of structuring the 5th and 6th grade lessons. Being new, this was perfect for me to get an idea of how it all worked. Then came my first 4th grade class. The homeroom teacher came up to me five minutes before it started and asked, "So, what are we doing today?" They expected me to lead the entire class myself. I was horrified. I didn't realize that for 1st through 4th grade, 'team-teaching' isn't really a thing. All I could do was take a deep breath and throw myself to the sharks that were the 4th graders of Higashi Kazumi Elementary. I'm not going to lie; it was brutal. I half-assed a lesson about vegetables. Half the class didn't listen to a word I stammered out, the other half had no idea what I wanted them to do, because I was making it up as I went along. I felt discouraged, like I was never going to be able to handle this, and like I'd certainly be fired before the first semester was over.

To summarize the first semester I suffered through in Japan, my 5th and 6th grade classes were snooze-fests that had me desperately trying to smile and pretend like learning how to say 'My name is' was the most interesting thing in the world. 1st through 4th grade classes were embarrassing spectacles of me struggling to control the class while following the lessons of my predecessor, which were 50% flashcards, and 50% bingo. I was 100% positive I'd made a mistake. Frustrated did not begin to cover it.

I knew that the situation was always going to remain the same as long as I sat there and let myself flounder. I told myself 'dammit I'm a college grad, not a fish!' So, I started to try pulling things together with my 5th and 6th grade teachers. I very politely made a few suggestions. More activities. More critical thinking. More doing, rather than just listening- I went largely ignored.

But, I tried again. And again. I continued to throw out ideas until one of them stuck. As I learned more about teaching, and gained more experience, my ideas became more polished as well. Now, the 5th and 6th grade teachers let me plan entire lessons.

1st through 4th grade became easier the more I did it. I scrapped the lessons from my predecessor and wrote ones that worked for my developing teaching style. Many of the 1st through 4th grade classes are only once a month, so every minute counts. Due to the short time you're given with them, it may seem like what you're doing has no impact. I promise, it is leaving an impression- even if it's only, 'wow, English is fun'.

You'd be surprised just how much they remember, just from doing a game, or learning a song. Even outside of class, frustration can be difficult to avoid though. Sometimes my bosses want me to sit in on other classes, like math and science, to 'foster communication' with the students. I always feel like I'm just distracting the kids, and it takes away from my usual time in the staff room to plan my lessons. I had to figure out a way to make the best of the time. So while the students work, I go around and help them if I can. I assist the teachers with paperwork. Pass out handouts. Anything to make myself more useful. If I really don't have the time to sit in, I politely explain the situation to my supervisor and principal, and they're perfectly fine with me working from my desk instead.

There will always be issues, some that can't be solved by persistence. Maybe you'll have a teacher who just won't listen to you. Maybe your class will be selected for research, and the teachers will insist on repeating the same boring lesson over and over so it's perfect when the class is observed. Sometimes classes will be cancelled in favor of making the kids run around to prepare for Sports Day. All those things will pass. If you have problems with a teacher, speaking to your supervisor, other coworkers- or even the principal or vice principal, can get it solved. Also, in Japan, teachers get rotated around with the new year. Whoever is giving you a hard time, they won't be there forever.

Acclimating is not an easy process. More than once I thought to myself: 'you know what, once the clock hits four I'm free, I don't care'. I still feel that way sometimes; but I came halfway across the world for a reason. It's impossible to keep a positive attitude twenty-four seven, but there are plenty of things you can do when you're feeling overwhelmed.

Keep your friends close for those days where you just feel like screaming. There's always a JET willing to go out and get drunk. Invite one of your coworkers somewhere. It's very common for people to seem reserved and distant at work, but in reality they just aren't sure how to approach you. Or if you're like me and prefer being alone, go to karaoke by yourself! If you get frustrated, remember that there is always something which can be done. Whether that be tackling the problem head on, changing the way you do things, or even just changing the way you think about things. Determination and a good attitude can go a long way. You are serving an important purpose here, you matter, and whether you're an ALT or CIR; you're bringing something to your work environment that only you can.

Miranda Reeder

# YOU'VE HEARD IT 1,000 TIMES, BUT: CULTURE SHOCK

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You've just arrived in Toyama. You're excited to be in Japan, nervous about work, and have so much to do! Maybe it's your first time in Japan or abroad. Maybe it's not. It wasn't my first time nor was it my first experience with culture shock.

I like to think culture shock is a helpful part of our adaption process. It is how we compare and contrast a whole new culture and eventually come to accept it (or most of it at least). Culture shock can be sneaky and the distress often arrives suddenly. Everyone experiences culture shock differently.

As you are probably still really excited about Japan you may wish to revisit this letter in a couple months, but here I hope to share with you my advice for coping with culture shock.

1. **Homesickness:** If it's your family, your pet, your friends, a local hangout, your student life, food, or even just your own culture you miss right now then here are a few things you can do. Don't feel afraid to call people you miss because they probably miss you too. Sometimes you may feel like all you do is call them, but know it's okay to do so. It's hard to live in a new place, let alone in a new country, so give yourself some time to adjust. In the same vein, don't be ashamed to hole up in your home and keep up with your favorite TV, games, movies, and music from home.

Remember, you can always get out there and be social! Joining a club is a great way to both adapt and meet people. There are many options at hand such as local clubs, groups, courses, and clubs at your schools. There are also plenty of groups made by current JETs and AJET committees if you want to enjoy time with others sharing the same Japan experience, make an impact, or even just enjoy a hobby you did at home with others.

I also suggest getting out! Go walk or bike around and find new hangouts. If you like to shop seek out new second hand stores and shops. Love nature; find all the good parks and hiking trails. Look for a new favorite restaurant or bakery. Hunt down a food from home you miss. Locate a pool or gym. Be a tourist in your new home and find all the must see spots here because Toyama is beautiful.

2. **Making a new home:** You've arrived at your new home. It's lonely and empty. Or it's full of stuff that isn't yours. It helps to make a house a home. Decorate, furnish, personalize, and clean. Make this place yours. You may begin to feel that everything is temporary but it is actually quite a while that you will be here. Settle into your home, your desks at work, and your community.

3. **Hobbies:** You now have a lot of time on your hands so if you have an interest in something start it now. Pick up a new hobby! All the time you put into it will distract you and sometimes that is just what you need. When I first moved here I picked up knitting. I had to watch videos, ask people for

help, buy supplies, learn a bunch of new Japanese, read books. It was a lot of fun and it got my mind into a culturally shared space. Knitting will always be the same no matter where you go.

4. **Don't sweat the small stuff:** Sometimes things will happen that irritate or frustrate you. This may happen a lot. When it does, remind yourself that you are in a new place and that a lot of things are different here. Some days will be hard and you just have to give yourself time to deal with it. Don't worry about things that happen too much and if you must then try to give yourself the time to process them.

5. **Rely on friends:** The people you meet here may seem amazing at their jobs and well put together but they were once you too. We all started at year one. Don't be afraid to ask for help or rely on others. Everyone in the Toyama community is very friendly and willing to help.

6. **Integrate at work:** What a great experience, all your coworkers are Japanese and they know very little about your home and culture. Share! Your coworkers may be busy or shy (or both) but know that they understand this must be hard on you. If you want to know more about Japan; ask them questions, attend enkai, share lesson ideas, or share English boards about your home culture.

Culture shock often creeps up on us. Maybe you really want to enjoy Japan but culture shock has you down. Maybe if it's really bad you just have a longing to go home right now. We all can have these feelings and many of us have gone through this already. Remember that you are not alone and resources exist to help you with this experience. I hope your time in Toyama is amazing. Welcome to the land of beautiful mountains and firefly squid.

Joan Conte  
jecinwv@gmail.com  
Takaoka Seibu JHS

## LIVING IN RURAL JAPAN — A SURVIVAL GUIDE

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Rural Japan, otherwise known as the “*inaka*,” is a barren and wild place. A place where giant “*mukade*” (centipedes) roam, eliciting shrill cries from children unfortunate enough to encounter them, as they run in fear to their mothers for comfort. A land where Nature is master over man, and people survive only through the sweat of their brow and the good fortune of the gods. This is a place of forest spirits, which talk through the rustle of the leaves of the trees, and where the rivers constantly sing their gurgling song. A place of danger and beauty. Your new home.

This survival guide is intended for all those fortunate enough to find themselves with rural placement on the JET program. It will detail how best to survive in the wilderness of Japan.

This guide is separated into four headings: Expectations, Transportation, Food, and Fun. Please make use of the information contained herein to make the most of your time in nature’s prison: the *inaka*.

### **Expectations:**

So you’re moving to the Japanese *inaka* from the city? WONDERFUL! Kiss your social life goodbye and plan to spend the foreseeable future arguing with the many bugs who take up residence in your living room as you slowly go mad. And while you mumble repeatedly all the warnings your friends and family gave you prior to coming to Japan while casually stroking the empty husk of a summer-cicada, you can recite the “Every Situation Is Different” mantra JET gave you.

Don’t expect the *inaka* to be like the city, and don’t expect Japan to be like your home country. If you come with an open mind and the desire to grow as a person, you’ll do just fine!

For those of you coming from a rural place in your home country, the shock will be likely less for you than for those coming from the city. Though it is still advised you repeat the “ESID” mantra to yourself, at least once a night.

### **Transportation:**

In your home city you may have taken a bus, train, taxi, or tram to the store to find food, but in the *inaka* you will need a car. You can construct one from twigs, river pebbles and spider-silk. This takes about forty-five minutes. Or alternatively you can buy or rent a car from a dealership.

Survival without a personal motor vehicle is possible, but one should be careful to note bus schedules and train time-tables so as to facilitate convenient movement throughout the vast countryside, as many trains and buses run less-regularly than in the city.

Walking is also an option, however care should be taken since it’s likely your legs (yes, those two spindly things you “stand” on sometimes are called legs) are likely weak from underuse because of a largely sedentary lifestyle playing video games all day. Walking is a great way to get from one place to another while enjoying the beautiful Japanese countryside, and likely an option you won’t be able to refuse anyway, so why not enjoy it. Caution: increased oxygen intake can lead to improved cognitive function.



**Food:**

In the event of finding yourself in the Japanese *inaka*, it is important to know what can and cannot be eaten. At first glance the *inaka* looks barren of things to eat. Do not be fooled! Even though the *inaka* looks empty, there are a great many ways to find food. The many “*conbini*” (convenience stores) that litter the Japanese *inaka* are full of edible things. One can find bento, beer, and melon pan in abundance in these places.

For those looking for a more cost effective or varied means of consumables, the occasional supermarket can be seen, though these are placed farther apart than *conbini*, and therefore transportation may be required.

One may be tempted to eat the many plants one sees growing in the *inaka*, but this is inadvisable, as many of these are inedible, and those that are edible are fiercely guarded by sweet-looking *obaachans* wielding various farming implements.

**Fun:**

Many a JET has gone mad from loneliness in the Japanese *inaka*, the trick to avoiding such a fate is planning, effort, and friends.

One should plan to have friends. One should make the effort to have friends. And lastly, it helps if one’s friends have friends.

Because of the distance between you and others, you should expect to spend more than the usual effort in making and keeping friends. But don’t worry, JET is a community that is very supportive of newcomers and will likely make your early months here easier in any way they can.

**Resources:**

For more information on living in rural Japan, I recommend the documentary, *My Neighbor Totoro* (by Studio Ghibli), for a more in-depth look at surviving in the *inaka*.

**Final Note:**

In all seriousness, however, there is too much about living in the Japanese *inaka* to be expressed in two pages. Much of it has to be learned from first-hand experience, because a great deal of it has to do with your expectations, your personality, and where you’re coming from. But the most important things to remember are; keep a positive outlook on life, plan for the worst and hope for the best, expect to be challenged and look forward to the challenge as something to help you grow, and finally, make friends. Friends will help you in almost every imaginable way.

There’s a reason this letter was written in a joking, light-hearted, way. Because a great deal of hardship can be overcome with a good attitude and a positive outlook. If you have that, you have everything you really need. All the rest will fall into place.

Daniel Galloway

## DON'T WORRY, IT WAS MY FIRST WINTER, TOO

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Coming from the U.S., I spent most of my life in warm, temperate places with strict climate control and insulated indoors. In Japan, you will find the opposite. Your apartment will most likely have little to no insulation, and the air conditioning unit will have limited capabilities to heat or cool your entire home. On top of that, energy costs are higher, so leaving an appliance running all day can lead to a high electric bill at the end of the month. What gives? Well, surviving your first winter in Japan requires a three-pronged approach: Insulating your home, heating it, and preserving your bodily warmth.

First, make sure your home is as insulated as possible. Line your windows with bubble wrap, cover cracks in the windows and doors with foam-backed tape (called すきまテープ *sukima teepu*), and block drafts as much as possible. You can use a stop panel, “cozy” board, rolled up towels, or bean-filled socks near doors and windows in order to block drafts, but it is recommended you do so after applying the すきまテープ. Most Japanese homes have hardwood floors, which can also get quite cold. A rug at the very least will provide a barrier to the cold seeping up from the floor, but a heated carpet (or “hot carpet” ホットカーペット *hotto caapetto*) is even better. There are silver sheets you can purchase to go under the carpet and reflect the heat upwards, thus maximizing your investment. A large area where heat is lost is the large glass windows and sliding doors, so make sure to purchase thick floor-length curtains. I have noticed a marked difference in temperature between the curtain and the window in my apartment.

Next, for heating your home there are a variety of options with different benefits and disadvantages. Kerosene stoves and fan heaters are widely used in schools and homes in Japan, as they are cheap and very effective. Kerosene (called 灯油, とうゆ, *touyu*) is sold along with heaters at home centers all around Japan, and in spite of certain risks they are highly recommended for inexpensively heating your entire home. Gas and oil heaters are also available, but cost more money to operate. You can provide spot heat via halogen, carbon, or infrared stove heaters if you only need a small area warmed, but they can be a bit pricey to purchase or run. The most beloved option is the *kotatsu* (こたつ)- a short table with a heater underneath covered by a blanket, or comforter. You put your feet and legs underneath the comforter, and enjoy its radiating warmth. It is very cozy, and great for when you plan on binge-watching Netflix on your computer. Warning: the *kotatsu* can suck out any productivity, as it is very easy to get *too* cozy under there. In order to conserve the heat in your apartment, use a humidifier (加湿器, かしつき, *kashitsuki*). Winter can be very dry indoors, and a humidifier will help you breathe easier at night. Even better, hang up your laundry indoors where your heater is going and as they dry they will humidify the air. If you must use your air conditioner to heat your home, try to limit its use for the evenings only and just layer clothes during the day.

Most importantly, keep your body warm. Before bed, take a nice hot bath to raise your internal body temperature, and put on some full-length pajamas. Then, while you sleep you can use an electric blanket (電気ひざ掛け毛布, でんき ひざ かけ もうふ), or a hot water bottle (湯たんぽ, *yutanpo*) to keep you warm. Just make sure that the *yutanpo* is tightly sealed- you don't want to wake up to a wet bed! At home, make sure to wear slippers or thick (fleece-lined) socks. Buy several pairs, so that

you have a few for guests. Moreover, winter is a great time to have friends over to your apartment, as the added body heat keeps the place warm. Sharing a nabe (hot pot) while underneath a kotatsu is also a fantastic way to keep the winter blues at bay. You may also want to buy a thick, long housecoat to wear at home. They can be bought for around 2000 yen at the mall. In America, I wasn't used to wearing layers but going through winter in Japan has made me a believer. Some people swear by Uniqlo's HeatTech products, but I think that stockings, regular thin, long-sleeved shirts, and (multiple) leggings underneath sweaters, pants, and long skirts works just as well. There are also a variety of body part warmers sold in drug stores and at the mall, from scarves (a.k.a. "mufflers") to stomach warmers (haramaki) to 80's-style leg and arm warmers. Don't forget about mittens, gloves, hats, and earmuffs as well!

Keeping your body warm with layers of clothing and warm accessories is important because your commute to school will definitely involve trudging through snow. Roads are not salted in Toyama in order to prevent contamination of the abundant rice fields, nor are most sidewalks widely cleared, so it is imperative that this is considered during your commute to school in the winter. If you drive, you will probably have to make time in the morning to shovel the snow away from your car, and take extra precautions while driving. Reduce speed, and turn corners more carefully in order to avoid hydroplaning. "Black ice" can also be a problem on both sidewalks and roads. And once you get to school, the hallways and corridors can be freezing cold. Only the rooms in active use tend to be heated, so that means mainly the staff room and some classrooms are warm at all. Some teachers may even have lap blankets draped over their legs while at their desk. Bathrooms, staircases, and the gymnasium are often left unheated.

In addition, take advantage of the free heating in public indoor spaces and walk around your local AEON mall. Just moving around helps to keep you warm. A cheap way to keep parts of your body warm are adhesive hot packs/pocket warmers called "kairo" カイロ. Some last 24 hours, and cost only 30 yen for a whole sheet. Kairo are quite helpful when you will be outside for long periods of time, in the snow, or biking to work. They vary in size and shape so that you can slip them in pockets, shoes, and bags-just don't place them next to your skin! My favorite way to stay warm during the winter is constantly imbibing hot drinks. There are many different coffee and tea shops to enjoy in Japan, and as soon as the weather starts to cool even vending machines start to carry hot beverages. You can even stop by a convenience store and grab a drink from a heated case.

If all else fails and you need an escape from the winters in Toyama, traveling to balmy countries in Southeast Asia or even Okinawa can provide an affordable respite from the cold. Look into cheap flights from Japan's discount airlines like Peach or Vanilla Air for winter break. My first winter in Japan was full of learning experiences, and living in the snow belt of Japan came with some particular quirks. With some resourcefulness and determination, you don't have to spend a lot of money or drive up your electric bill in order to keep warm. Many things, like a kotatsu, can be purchased from secondhand stores and your fellow JETs. You can find a lot of specific information about dealing with Japanese winters online, on websites like Tokyo Cheapo or Surviving In Japan. Good luck!

Amelia Knight

## SHOPPING; A CURIOUS ADVENTURE

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First of all, welcome to the Toyama community! Congratulations on being placed in Toyama prefecture. You'll have a great time here- after the jet-lag wears off! There are a lot of new things, but this guide to shopping will help you out a bit. Your first paycheque will come soon, so start spending those yennies!

Hopefully, you'll be able to get in touch with your predecessor before you come to Japan. They can tell you about things they have available already in your apartment. They may ask to sell you some of those things, especially larger appliances. You don't have to agree to this, or you can always ask for more pictures of things before agreeing to buying anything. You'll most likely be left with some smaller stuff that your pred won't mention, such as cutlery and serving ware. It's best to do an inventory of what you've been left before you head out to go shopping!

### **Going to the Store!**

Before going to the store, ask the people around you for some recommendations. They'll probably know the closest convenience stores, drug stores, grocery stores, and ¥100 stores.

For **small household goods**, check out a ¥100 store first. The most common chain of these stores is Daiso. Daiso is amazing. The products are usually of good quality and often you can find what you need there. Do note that although they are of decent quality, sometimes you might want to invest in something sturdier. I destroyed about 3 Daiso whisks before I cracked and bought a higher quality one on Amazon.

If you're shopping for food, definitely ask around. Sales at grocery stores in Japan may be a bit different than what you're used to. Back home in Canada, there is a weekly flyer with sale prices, which last for a week. In Japan, sales change daily. Most supermarkets have special sale days, for example one store near me has ice cream on sale every Wednesday. There are also special campaigns; at the store closest to me they give out coupons for Saturdays and Sundays if you spend more than ¥1500.

For **foreign foods**, there are stores like Yamaya, Jupiter, Gyomu Super, and Costco. These stores are in different locations around the prefecture, with some being more convenient to access than others.

**Clothes shopping** can be a bit difficult for some people. If you want to shop around at many different stores, going to one of the two more popular malls might be best. There is an Aeon Mall in Takaoka and Favore in Toyama City. They both have a wide variety of stores. I do a lot of my clothing shopping at Uniqlo. Their prices are relatively cheap, with a wide variety of sizes available – especially online. Unfortunately, the stores only carry sizes S, M, L, and XL, so clothes can be difficult to try on if those sizes don't fit you. Another good store to check out for women's clothes is Shimamura. They sell some larger sized clothes along with a wide variety of home goods. There are some other clothing stores in the prefecture that carry larger sized clothes. You're probably best to ask someone near you where the closest store is.

For **shoes**, you can likely find some at one of the malls, unless you have big feet. I wear a women's size 10 in North American sizes. I can't find women's shoes that fit me most of the time, so I usually order shoes online.

If you're having difficulties finding something in stores, you might have luck checking online. Amazon.co.jp is super convenient – there is even the option to change the language of the site to English. Shipping is quite fast and in most cases very inexpensive. Another great site for online shopping is Rakuten. With

Amazon and a lot of other online sites in Japan there are multiple options for payment, which I'll talk about next!

### **Payment**

When shopping in a physical store, you will soon come to realize that Japan is a cash based society. Be prepared to pay for everything in cash. Credit card usage in Japan is getting increasing, but know that for the most part paying with a credit card will not be an option unless you're in a bigger city or at a chain restaurant or store.

It is important to note that bank ATMs in Japan do close; be aware of this so as to not end up in a situation where you don't have any money. There is also a fee for using bank ATMs on certain days and after a certain time. Be sure to learn what the hours are at your bank. You can also use ATMs at convenience stores, but there will be a fee.

When you buy something online here, there will be a few options for payment: These include cash on delivery, credit card, and paying at convenience store. Cash on delivery is very convenient, but there is an additional fee for this convenience. In my opinion, the easiest way to pay for online purchases is at the convenience store. In this case, you will be sent a payment number that you will need to input into the machines at the convenience store of your choice. As each convenience store chain has a different machine, you'd be best to google how to use them. There are English guides for all of the main chains' payment machines. Using those machines at the convenience store is also a way for you to buy tickets. You can buy bus tickets, concert tickets, and movie tickets at the machines! Wow, so convenient!

Along with paying for online orders at the convenience store, sometimes you may need to pay some of your bills there. For some bills, you will receive a payment slip in the mail. You just need to take that slip and your money to the register to pay. It's quite simple and you don't need to say anything.

Another method of payment is bank transfers, called *furikomi*. For this, you need to know the banking information of the recipient. There is a great guide to *furikomi* on the Toyama JETs website, so check it out if you need to pay using this method!

You can also pay for online purchases using prepaid cards. You can usually buy these at the convenience store or sometimes even at your local supermarket. Some of these cards do require you to set up an account on a Japanese website, which can be quite confusing. These prepaid cards do come in handy because there are times where your only option is to pay for your online purchases using a credit card.

This a basic guide to shopping in Toyama. There are loads of great stores around the prefecture and you should be able to find most of what you need for daily life nearby. Whatever you can't find nearby you can usually find online. If you're craving a big city shopping experience and don't want to go all the way to Tokyo, Kanazawa in the neighbouring Ishikawa Prefecture has some great shopping spots that you can check out.

Hopefully this information will be helpful for you! My main piece of advice would be to talk to the people who live near you – they likely know a great hidden shopping gem! Happy shopping!

Beck Gingrich, Sakurai Senior High School, rgingri@gmail.com

## PROFESSIONALISM AS AN ALT

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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.

### 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.”

### 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.

### 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.

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

## CIR SPOTLIGHT!

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Dear friends, congratulations on being selected as a Toyama JET! We all cannot wait to see you here soon!

My name is Tanya Britcina, and it is my 4<sup>th</sup> year on JET Programme. I am CIR for Toyama Prefectural Government and I want to share some information about CIR's activities.

A CIR's duties depend on the organization of their placement, and country one represents. Most of us conduct a variety of activities: translations of business correspondence, newsletters, and tourism information; interpret for courtesy visits; run language classes and visit schools; provide consultations for foreign residents.

Once a year in February CIRs, in cooperation with ALTs and other volunteers, organize the JET World Festival. To plan this event, all the CIRs have monthly meeting in Toyama City, which provides us with the opportunity to discuss other issues related to work and daily life. Meetings usually happen on Wednesdays, and if you do not have plans after work (seriously, do not plan anything for the evening! 😊), you can hang out with other CIRs in less formal atmosphere.

Some of us can be loaded with work, and others can get bored with nothing much to do. If you have tons of free time, you can think of your own project, like language classes, blogs for tourists, lectures on your culture etc. If you need money for your activities, you can get the budget money after getting through necessary procedures, but there are ways to do it without using even a penny. You are welcome to ask me for tips on how to do this.

Another important thing is to accept requests for work- even if it is not mentioned in your contract. You can take advantage of it and get incredible experience in various areas. Even if you feel unconfident, just give it a try! Later you will be able to polish new skills that might be important for your future career. For example, even though I am Russian, I have done cooking classes and played in the tourism promotion video in English (because Japanese people believe that every European-looking person speaks English). Well, it was good opportunity for me to learn something new.

Speaking about learning, do not miss Japanese English Translation Interpreting classes and other workshops or internships. It helps to level-up professionally, and gives you a chance to travel and hang out with JETs from other areas. By the way, every year in November CIRs from all over Japan gather in Chiba for the Mid-Term Conference. There you will take part in professional workshops, discussions and exchange your experiences with other CIRs. The conference is usually held in Tokyo Bay Makuhari hotel, and you will have to book a room to stay there for 3 days. You can share a room with other CIRs to share expenses. Ask your senpais for advice on this.

Last but not the least thing is to prepare to meet your new bosses and coworkers. Do not forget to bring sweets or small souvenirs to show your consideration. You can ask your predecessors about the quantity.



I hope you enjoy your work in this beautiful prefecture. Breathtaking views of Tateyama mountain range, warm welcome of the best JET community and wonderful adventures are waiting for you in Toyama!

## TOYAMA AJET

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Welcome to Toyama! You may have been worried before getting notice of where you were going, but do not fret, have one of the best placements on the JET Program!

You've obviously heard of the JET Program, but have you heard of AJET? AJET is an independent, self-supporting, volunteer organization run by Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program participants. AJET promotes community and peer fellowship, provides support and resources, and acts as the representative body of JET participants.

There are two levels of AJET: national and prefectural.

Toyama AJET is one of the most active prefectural chapters in the country. Many prefectures are unlucky in that they have few JETs spread throughout their area or it is not easy to regularly host events. Some prefectures don't even have AJET!

Last year, we were lucky to have twelve active participating Toyama AJET council members plan trips around the country, social events within the prefecture, raise over 100,000 yen for charity and continue to create and publish The TRAM (Toyama's online magazine). Every April, applications for our prefectural chapter open up and the council changes positions.

These representatives (Toyama JETs!!) plan fun events where we can all participate together. Currently, as you pack your bags to leave your home country, we are planning welcome parties, welcome weekend, an excursion trip to the next prefecture and more to celebrate your arrival!

By participating in AJET events, you can build stronger relationships with not only fellow JETs, but also meet people, both Japanese and non-Japanese, within the community. By participating in events or writing as a contributor for The TRAM, you will inevitably network around the prefecture and feel more connected to Toyama. One of our main objectives is to be inclusive to all, not just JET participants.

Volunteering time to continue to standard of involvement for Toyama JETs is what gives our prefecture such a good reputation. We hope to have you attend and volunteer with us in the future as we grow this community!

If you would like to receive AJET emails prior to arriving, please reach out to us at [toyama.ajet@gmail.com](mailto:toyama.ajet@gmail.com).

We are also on Facebook! Please search: **Toyama AJET Social Events** , **Toyama AJET Charity**, **Toyama AJET Excursions** (we have a lot of pages!)

Looking forward to meeting you!

Lilly Hart (2016-17 Toyama AJET President)

## WHAT ARE YOU?... THE ASIAN JET

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Welcome and Congrats on making JET!

So you might have already read a TON about this phenomenon, the “Ninja” foreigner or the “Invisible” ALT. I’ll try to colour it in with some Toyama and personal perspective.

Also, before I go into that, I’d also like to take a moment to point out that ASIAN is a very broad term. Asian can include people of Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Indian, Malay, Filipino, Indonesian, Vietnamese and even Russian descent. Asia is a HUGE continent. So, being a Singaporean-Indian girl, I can’t possibly give you the know all see all breakdown. My experiences are VASTLY different from that of, say an American of Vietnamese descent or a Brit of half-Japanese descent or a mixed-race Asian.

The great thing about being an Asian JET is the exposure your students (and the people around you) benefit from and the interesting conversations you’ll have. I’ve met a number of people (even fellow JETs and foreigners) who have a very narrow idea of what an English-speaking country is or even what an English-speaking person looks like. I’ve been told that my English was really good or really clear and I have no reply to that except, “I sure hope so. Hahaha.” It’s also not uncommon to be asked what my native language is especially when I say I’m from Singapore. For the record, it’s English (and Tamil, because most Singaporeans are bilingual).

Personally, I’ve also been spared most of the stares and unwanted attention unless someone notices my foreignness. As a 150-something cm female with black hair and black eyes, I don’t attract much attention. Talking to most other Asian JETs I hear similar stories. My Singaporean-Chinese friend used blend so well into Toyama that even fellow JETs would jump when she walked up to them. Some have even bowed to her before realizing it was her. So, there’s that.

If you’re brown like me, or just not very “Japanese looking” (that’s another debate there), people will recognize that you’re a foreigner and as of now, I’m pretty well recognized by the station master, at the shopping center near my place, the Starbucks and the cafes I frequent. However, and this is just my opinion, so you can take it with a pinch of salt. I’ve never gotten stared at the way some of the blonde haired JETs get in the trains. Maybe I’m that obtuse, but, I’ve worn Kimonos on the tram and I still turn less heads.

**Racism...**As far as racism goes, it’s mostly ignorance. Some of the most memorable questions being, “You don’t have trains and mobile phones in Singapore, do you?” or “Do you speak English?”(after conversing

for 10 minutes in English) or “So what’s it like in Indonesia?” (one year into knowing me) or “So which part of the United States is Singapore in?” or “Foreign men are such gentlemen aren’t they? I’d love to have an international marriage and a HALF-baby!”

Sometimes, people also talk about skin colour in a way that’s not seen as acceptable in many other countries. I’ve had a teacher put his arm up against mine and say, “Oh look! My skin’s darker than Yagnya’s!” and a student say, “You’ve got just the right skin tone! Not black, not white!”

All that makes me want to say “Noooooooooooo! YOU CAN’T DO THAT!!!!” But instead I take everything as a chance to just conduct mini impromptu lessons on life and the world. It’s worth it for most part, and sometimes I get the great satisfaction of watching a light bulb switch on behind their eyes. I would even go as far as to say that these conversations have made me much more aware of my own identity, especially since I took my existence for granted, back home.

In conclusion (or as conclusive as this 2 page-ish letter can be), life isn’t all that bad. There will always be cases that leave a bitter after-taste in your mouth but communication, kindness and patience goes a long way with people in general. Don’t feel like you have to dumb down a conversation to satisfy people. Your identity is sacred. At the same time, you’re also not obliged to answer intrusive or rude questions or anything you’re not comfortable with. You do you!

### **Links and Groups**

#### **Asian Pacific Islander Association for Japan Exchange and Teaching (API AJET)**

The mission of API AJET is to provide peer support for the Asian Pacific Islander (API) community in Japan, as well as to raise local and global awareness about the diverse range of issues that face this community. The group is open to any and all who wish to share experiences and/or promote cross-cultural understanding through discussions, events, activities, etc.

Find more on the AJET webpage: <http://ajet.net/community/special-interest-nationality-language-groups/>

A. Yagnya

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## JETS OF AFRICAN DESCENT: NO, CHOCOLATE IS NOT MY FAVORITE ICE CREAM FLAVOR

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Congratulations! You've made it! You're going to Japan. Most importantly, you're headed to Toyama. If you don't already know from the previous letters here or your own research, you're headed to the pristine, luxuriously rich in nature and views, Japanese countryside. Yes, the country. Of course there are cities, but nothing major like a Tokyo or an Osaka. So, you might be thinking to yourself, "Are there any black people in Toyama?" The serious answer is, "YES, of course!" The hilariously real answer is, "Ha! Not really, bro."

As always, there are advantages and disadvantages of being noticeably different. Advantage: You are beautiful-work it! You're about to come in contact with a lot of people who have had very little experiences with foreigners, let alone those of African descent. Show them that pride you have in your melanin! It is so important to build bridges of understanding and acceptance as a world community. Disadvantage: You're sometimes going to be at center stage. I do not own a car, so I walk everywhere (You should get a car if you can, by the way. #strugglelife). As someone who is not only black, but also very tall, everyone and they mama notices me! It is now pretty amusing to me, though. It has become a great way to introduce myself and start up a conversation.

How you handle these, sometimes, trying moments can make or break the type of experience you will have while you are here. You will no doubt get the occasional stare downs or the subtle and not always so subtle gasps when you enter a room. But in terms of outright, blatant *racism*, I have never personally experienced it. At least, not directly to my face. I have confronted leaps and bounds more prejudice in my own home country. The people in Toyama are the nicest. You will definitely experience a lot of curiosity. More often than not, people might ask you a crazy, ridiculous question or ask to touch your hair. Hopefully, nothing ever as far as obvious discrimination. Your attitude when you come into these situations will speak more volumes than what you may actually say. Remember, you are here as a cultural ambassador. Spread that culture and positivity! Spread it!

Let me give you an example from school. It was random-English-conversation-time with the students and the question was, "What's your favorite ice cream flavor?" When I asked them to guess mine,

was I surprised that their first guess was chocolate? No. Was I still hoping that they wouldn't guess chocolate? Yes. But, is chocolate a completely legitimate answer to that question? Absolutely. My negative mindset, however, led me to believe they answered that way because of the color of my skin. Whether it was the motivation or not, I realized at that moment that I needed to take a step back and look at how I was approaching things. I should not have been putting up my defenses or feel embarrassed because I am "noticeable." I knew I had to change my mindset.

Always remember to reach out when you have questions or need some advice. There are JETs of African descent from all over the world. You can also find online community groups like Blacks in Japan, Black Women in Japan, and Japan Napturals, just to name a few on Facebook. I must say, though, be cautious of what you learn about living in Japan from these groups. We all know how social media works. More often than not, sensationalized negative experiences and complaints tend to overpower the positive experiences. Stay woke, but also take everything with a grain of salt. It will be your own experiences that matter the most.

Now, let's talk briefly about health and hygiene. In terms of hair products specifically geared for more afro-texture (some might say kinky/coily) hair, finding those products is not easy, especially if you end up in a smaller community. At the same time, unless you are very particular about the products you use, it is not impossible to find decent alternatives at a local drug store. Come with a good supply of the styling creams, hair oils, satin scarves, makeup products, etc. that you can spare room for in your bag. Then, find (bribe) someone at home who would be willing to send you those supplies you cannot live without. And in case you forgot, there's the internet. Just know you might be spending a bit (sometimes a lot) more for some of these products. This could be a good opportunity to go back to basics and learn new ways to take care of yourself. It is all part of the adventure, right?

Congrats, again, for making it to Japan! It will truly be a life changing experience for so many reasons. In case you have any further questions, feel free to email me at any time. Looking forward to meeting you soon!

Jane Asumadu

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# LGBTQIIA JETS; FEELING THE RAINBOW PRIDE IN JAPAN!

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Welcome to Toyama! This is the first time for this topic in our welcome letters, so I hope you can find this helpful. I know that I would have loved to see this in my welcome letter package three years ago!

First off- I want to let you know that you're not alone! We have a small, but friendly group of LGBT+ JETs in Toyama. We recently started a private Facebook group. Though we appreciate the support of our allies, this group is only for members of the LGBT+ community. This is mostly for privacy issues – not everyone is out and not everyone wants the world to know their business.

If you're interested in joining this group, please shoot me an e-mail at [rgingri@gmail.com](mailto:rgingri@gmail.com) or send a private message on Facebook.

I just want to preface this by saying that my experience is not the same as everyone else's, and what you experience as an LGBT+ person in Japan might be different from what we have experienced. I've asked for the input of a few different people on this, so hopefully our senpai wisdom will help you out a bit!

## **LGBT+ Rights in Japan**

Being gay in Japan is not a crime, but legal protections from discrimination do not exist. Despite this, there haven't been many cases of discrimination—at least that have been reported. Unfortunately, LGBT+ rights are not something discussed by many federal politicians, and none of the major political parties have official stances on LGBT+ rights. There are a few openly gay and openly transgender Japanese politicians though! Currently same-sex marriage is not accepted in Japan, though there have been a few cities that have implemented civil-partnership arrangements or that recognise same-sex unions. Transgender individuals are able to legally change their gender on documents, but only after sexual reassignment surgery.

In regards to education, there has been a push for educators to know about how to deal with any bullying of LGBT+ students in all levels of schooling.

## **Being In, Being Out**

For me, coming to Japan has been a weird experience in regards to my sexuality. I came out when I was in high school. All of my friends, my co-workers, and my parents knew I was queer. It wasn't an issue, mostly due to me living in Canada where there is generally an open attitude towards LGBT+ people. I was out and proud. That changed when I came to Japan. I went back into the closet in my professional life, though I'm mostly out of the closet with my friends and the JET community. I have chosen to keep some of the aspects of my identity private and only shared some things with my close friends. I think it's important to make your own decision about whether or not you want to be out. It's your own personal business and you shouldn't feel forced to come out if you don't want to.

It is also important to remember that there are JETs who do come from parts of the world where LGBT+ rights may not be the same as in your home country. For this reason, it is important to respect other people's privacy and their wishes about being out or not. Don't be the jerk who outs someone.

## **Do You Have a Boyfriend?**

One of the most popular questions you will get from students during your self-intro classes is about dating. If you are female-presenting, they will ask you about having a boyfriend. If you are male-presenting, they will ask you about having a girlfriend. Unfortunately, this is just something you'll have to deal with. My personal method of dealing with this is turning it into a joke and saying I have an obscene number of boyfriends. Each person has their own way of dealing with it, but you will get asked personal questions that you may not want to answer. Unfortunately, heteronormativity is strong in Japan.

It won't just be your students who are asking these questions. You'll likely get asked personal questions like this by your JTEs and other Japanese people in the community. It's important to try to answer in a polite way, no matter how frustrated you may become.

### **Bringing Up LGBT+ Topics at Work**

There are ways to bring LGBT+ topics into your lessons. Students do a lot of work writing practice essays and it can be easy to make a topic about same-sex marriage or something similar. Two years ago at the annual senior high school English presentation contest, a school did a research project on same-sex marriage in Japan that was excellent!

### **The LGBT+ Scene - Toyama, Chubu, and More**

If you're expecting some secret underground LGBT+ scene in Toyama, I'm sorry to disappoint you. There isn't much going on out here in the countryside. There is a group called "Rainbow Heart Toyama" that does work educating people about LGBT+ people. There may not be a scene in Toyama, but there are some places nearby. Though I have never been, I have heard that Nagoya in Aichi has a fair sized scene. I have been to some events in Tokyo, which has a pretty active community.

There are also a few pride parades in Japan - the biggest being Tokyo Rainbow Pride which takes place during the May Golden Week holidays. I attended this year with a few other people from Toyama and it was a lot of fun! There is also Kansai Rainbow Parade which takes place in Osaka in October. In Sapporo there is the Sapporo Rainbow March, which is held in September. Kyushu has a parade which is held in Fukuoka called Kyushu Rainbow Pride. It takes place in November.

### **Other Info**

If you're looking for more info about LGBT+ life in Japan, you should definitely check out Stonewall Japan's website or their Facebook group. There is some good information up on those places that will probably answer some of your questions.

I hope that this welcome letter will be of some help to you! If you have any questions, feel free to send me an e-mail or check out our Facebook group! We're looking forward to meeting some new faces. Hopefully we'll be able to arrange a meeting shortly after you all arrive!

Beck Gingrich

Sakurai Senior High School

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## GENTLE GIANTS; THE TALL JET

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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



## THE MARRIED JET

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First and foremost, congratulations on becoming a JET and 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! You are about to embark on a journey of lasting memories that will hopefully strengthen the bonds of union you and your partner already share. You should be excited.

If you are asking yourself, “Who is this dude and why does he feel qualified to tell me how wonderful life is going to be in Toyama with my S.O,” allow me to 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 fully on one another for those first few months of survival. At the time our combined Japanese skill was just north of a trained monkey. Needless to say, we got our trial-by-fire first year of marriage.

And quite frankly it wouldn't change a thing about it. It is a roller coaster ride, for sure, but it is one that you get to experience with the person you love.

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 dash of gossip-fuel). Anytime an obaachan asks you about your relationship, your answer will spread like wild fire throughout the community.

“When did you meet?”

“What, you cook *together*?!” \*shocked gasp\*

“How old is your SO?”

“Does your SO like sushi?”

“Is your SO Japanese?”

“How many children do you have?”

“Do you say ‘I love you?’” \*ultra shocked gasp followed by\* “LABU LABU.”

“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... all will 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.

One thing I noticed is that my students are very interested in my marriage. Luckily, Aly and I are active in the community so nowadays the majority of the questions are whether or not we love one another followed by giggling. Just be prepared to field questions in the class room as well. In my experience, it has been nothing but fun.

Aside from what to expect from the natives, I am sure you already know 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 me and Aly.

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 housing/town/work situation from the start. If you have the opportunity, I would advise you to avoid this. 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. After having used these apps for years now, I prefer LINE for texting and Skype for video chatting.

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 mentally!

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...

But cabin fever and going stir crazy are real things.

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 making an effort to find 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. As of our fourth year, she is the official ALT for the Funashi-village junior high and elementary schools! There are also eikaiwa classes that need to be taught. Luckily, being a foreigner in Toyama is a commodity and jobs are available as long as you aren't waiting for them to come to

you. Also, if your partner is proficient in Japanese (or other languages), there are even more avenues to pursue in acquiring employment. The point is not to 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, flights, and now the Shinkansen are available to you. If you want to move to where your partner is, you will have to contact your BOE and CLAIR for further information on that process.

As a married JET, 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 awe-inspiring mountains which cut the prefecture in two; we have beaches, hills, temples, shrines, waterfalls, ziplines, ski resorts, 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 our favorite past times. With the arrival of the Hokuriku Shinkansen, exploration is no longer limited to day trips around Toyama, but day trips around Japan. As an aside, the arrival of the Shinkansen also forced airlines to drop their prices on flights to Tokyo – we have flown to Tokyo, which is a fifty-minute flight, for less than it would have cost to take the bullet train there. Options!

Make friends! Your relationship deserves relationships! Chances are your first new friendships will be with fellow JETs; take advantage of that and form lasting bonds with people from a myriad of different countries, cultures, and backgrounds. 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 marriage 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, talk about funny anecdotes, and situations that had us frustrated beyond belief at work or around town, 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 get ready to fall in love with Toyama just as we did..

- **Jeff Newby**
- [jnewbycsub@gmail.com](mailto:jnewbycsub@gmail.com)

## LDR; ENJOY THE SUSHI, BUT REMEMBER YOUR PARTNER'S NOT PSYCHIC

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Relationships! Love! Romance! The things we all love to love, and sometimes hate to love. Let's face it. Relationships are challenging whether you live together in the same apartment, in the same city, or maybe a 'this isn't ideal but I can deal with it if there's no traffic' commute away. But what happens when that comfortable distance goes from 'I can get there in 3~5 Chainsmokers remixes' to hundreds of miles and possibly even opposite time zones?

Fear not. No two relationships are ever going to be identical, but if you're reading this letter it likely means something has changed for you as it did for us; suddenly you find yourself in a long distance relationship (aka LDR). Or! Maybe you're prepping for that cute stranger you might meet on Tinder in another prefecture! Either way, let's get down to it.

The first thing you should know, is that we're not experts on relationships. But between the two of us we have made it through quite a few failures. We're not here to sugar coat, but we are here to help. So break out your highlighters (or just keep reading)!

Upon much deep (and some obvious) reflection, we realized there were some major things that went wrong the first time around (when our LDRs failed). We were in some denial, didn't face our issues head on, become slightly consumed by insecurities, had poor communication and didn't take advantage of the resources we had available. By focusing on and improving these key areas, the things that once seemed impossible and unbearable are no longer so!

And now, without further delay, here are the main points for maintaining your relationship.

**Continue the connection:** So all of the sudden you're across the planet in gorgeous Toyama and feeling the physical and emotional withdrawal due to flying solo. There are plenty of ways you can stay connected to your squad back home. Of course there's social media, texting just to say "hey, thinking about you!", and tagging them in all Mr. Krab memes you can find. We recommend all of the above, but video chat is best. The list of available options is so long and extensive (and costs basically nothing) you have no excuse not to use it!

Why is this better than a phone call or just texting? Obviously because you get to see that face you love so much (and they can be graced with yours!) but also because it helps to re-establish a feeling of connectedness and normalcy. This may be more difficult if there's now a big time difference; and sure, you could just Skype them real quick to say "Hey, how was your day? Sorry gotta go to work/bed/the best ramen spot/wherever now, bye". Or, you could wake up a bit earlier / stay up a bit later and cook/eat a meal together. You could watch your favorite TV show together every week, watch a movie, play a game and kill zombies together, or have date night. Make time for your person. This is not always easy but we promise, it will be worth it.

(realtalk disclaimer #1) Keep in mind that staying connected with a LDR is difficult. Remember those times you would just see each other and not say anything because you were doing your own thing, watching a movie, painting your nails, gaming, studying, etc.? Soon, you will be confronted with losing that comfort. LDRs will force you to speak to each other more without the comforts of being cuddled. This can be done! And it leads us to our next point...

**Compromise:** The adjustment of an LDR is going to be hard- there's no avoiding it. Some days will fly by as you eat the best seafood of your life, and others will feel like pulling teeth. The key to surviving these waves of emotion is to sit down with yourself and decide what you're willing to do to make the relationship work. An LDR is absolutely **not** impossible, but getting everything you want 100% of the time is. A new chapter in your life has just begun, and you probably want to throw yourself into it head on to get as much out of it as possible. That's great! You should be excited because this is an amazing opportunity, and there's so much to experience. This is the part where you get real with yourself.

We recommend sitting down and really thinking about both your feelings and priorities. Consider things like: communicating at inconvenient times, travel expenses, and maybe missing out on things to keep your Skype dates.

Over time, you may have exactly the same feelings as when you left, but maybe you don't. That's okay! Nothing stays exactly the same forever, and that's why our last tip may just be the most important.

**Communicate:** Ah yes, we've all heard this advice. We've all read that article that says "communication is key in maintaining a relationship" and probably even rolled our eyes once or twice. Well, guess what? Literally *every single one* of those people were right! If you're not already communicating well in your relationship, NOW is the time to develop these necessary skills! Having a big physical distance can potentially cause an even bigger emotional one, but it doesn't have to.

(realtalk disclaimer #2) Most importantly: **keep it real.** You might be tempted to flirt with the boy/girl at the bar who surprisingly isn't exoticizing you or sleep with a friend that you always thought was cute from orientation. On the other hand...you might be asking..who's @getawayfrommybae? And why do they keep liking my partner's posts?! What are they doing on their night out?

Take a deep breath. There are no rules in relationships other than those you set for yourself. Have you considered/discussed these types of scenarios with your partner? How are they feeling? Have you set clear boundaries for physical/emotional relationships? Are you willing to make changes and potentially modify your relationship? How are you *really* treating each other? It's normal for either/both of you to feel jealous and have FOMO feels. What's not okay is if it's consuming your thoughts or if one of you is making the other feel guilty for having friends and/or "moving on."

If you start to feel differently or have doubts, say something. If you're still completely happy and satisfied, tell your partner! Insecurities go both ways. Work hard to alleviate those feelings. Compromise is key, but never compromise yourself.

Before we leave you, one last moment of realtalk. Sometimes LDRs don't work out. No matter how hard you or your partner try, someone may never be satisfied or feel like it's enough. It might get hard. It could end. You might cry and have days when you regret leaving. If this happens, you'll be ok. We promise. This, as is with all things in life, is what you make of it! Soak up as much of this beautiful place, food and culture as humanly possible. Be honest and kind to others, and especially to yourself. You're about to join a giant community of awesome people in the best prefecture in Japan! Talk to us. Ask for help. We've been there and we're here for you (and we really do know the best ramen spots).

Lisa lives in Kurobe City and will join you for sushi any time, day or night. ([lisa.hogya@gmail.com](mailto:lisa.hogya@gmail.com))

Nancy will be your online date if you're into sharing your Netflix account. ([nancyngo@live.com](mailto:nancyngo@live.com))

## RELIGIOUS JETS

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First off, welcome to Toyama and all that it has to offer; from the food, culture, people, and picturesque scenery. We can all agree that it is easy to connect with those who have the same interest/disinterest or likes/dislikes than us and more times than not, we try to seek those kinds of people out that fit closely to our own MOI. When I first came to Toyama it was important for me to find a church, group of people I could connect with, and a place my own faith could grow. Japan is a mostly non-religious country as far as western religions go, however there are outlets for people of vast religious backgrounds to connect with like-minded individuals.

I would start within the JET community, asking around to people who have been in Toyama for some time. They will have information on where you can get plugged into a group that fits your own faith background. You could be surprised at how many JET's may actually share in the same belief system as you, and they could become a person in which you can confide, and talk to about those things important to you.

A second outlet for information is the Toyama Jets website ([toyamajets.net](http://toyamajets.net)) which has a great section of resources for local churches in the Toyama prefecture, that you can visit and join. You might be thinking, *"But what if I can't understand Japanese or speak Japanese?"* Don't worry, I know there are plenty of church groups that can accommodate you and have English speakers within the church to help translate the service. They will even help you get settled into the church. Don't be afraid to reach out for help within the Toyama community to help you get connected. Again, you would be surprised at how many people are connected or know of a church in which you can join.

I hope that your life in Toyama is one that brings lots of growth for you, and you enjoy all that it has to offer.

Joseph Jackson

SHS JET

Tonami Technical High School

## LOVING, AND NOT-LOVING JAPANESE FOOD

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Hello, and welcome to Japan! Perhaps you are already familiar with Japanese food, or perhaps (like me) you've rarely eaten sushi or ramen and don't know how to use chopsticks. If you already like Japanese food, then great, and if not, you'll get the opportunity to try all sorts of new foods. Also, there are many Japanese foods (for example, soba, somen, and udon noodles) that are not popular or widely available in everyone's home country, so, even if you really like the most popular Japanese foods like sushi and ramen, you will probably find completely new foods to try.

Even if you're a picky eater, like I am, I suggest you take the opportunity to try a lot of new foods, because you never know when you'll end up really liking something. For instance, I disliked shrimp when I had it back in America, but now *ebi-ten* (shrimp in fried batter) is one of my favorite foods! I've also tried pasta with octopus, and, surprisingly, I liked it very much.

You'll also encounter foods that you don't like so much, and while it is embarrassing to admit to your host/friend/waitress that you don't like something, or for them to guess as much, I haven't found it to be a bigger problem than it was back in America. If you are polite and try to eat new foods, people won't be offended that you don't like one or two things. And when it comes to special orders...

Before I came to Japan, I read that special ordering in restaurants here was not done and servers would be confused or offended if you tried to do so, but I have not found that to be the case (although I imagine it depends a lot on the restaurant, and I have not been to any fancy Japanese restaurants). I usually give special orders at my favorite restaurants and found that restaurants will generally accommodate such orders and will even reduce the cost of your meal, if you ask for it to be served without something that usually comes with it. The biggest problem I've had with special ordering is the language barrier: obviously, you need to know the name of the food you don't like in Japanese and a polite way to ask for your meal to be served without that thing. I don't like a topping that automatically comes with most foods, so the polite phrase I use for special ordering is *(food name) wo irenaide kudasai*, which means "Please don't put (food name) on the dish." (The topping I don't like is small green onion shavings, called *negi* in Japanese, which I

mention because I have met several others who don't like this as well.) Of course, if you want something to be added to your dish instead of taken away, you will say something different. I even special order in this way at my school's cafeteria, and would urge you not to be afraid to do so if it is possible, since you'll likely be eating many, many meals there.

Finally, about table manners: as you may or may not know, slurping noodles is not rude in Japan and you might get strange looks if you do NOT do so, or people might comment about how "daintily" you eat. However, you must always leave your chopsticks lying on the chopstick rest (if you have one) or lay them flat on (or next to) your plate. If you leave your chopsticks sticking straight up out of a bowl of rice or noodles, you're showing bad table manners because the chopsticks look like incense sticks set up for funerals. It's easy to do this by accident if you are in a hurry (I have done it even though I knew the rule), so try to be careful of that. However, people are generally understanding about things like this because you're obviously a foreigner (perhaps less so for Asian JETs).

I hope you'll have fun trying new foods like octopus, squid, and fish paste, even if you don't like everything.

Happy eating!

Alexis Finnerty

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## BEWARE THE BACON BITS- VEGETARIAN JET

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『すみません、私は肉と魚介類と肉と魚介類のエキスも食べられない。

乳製品は大丈夫です！私が食べられるものは何かありますか？』

Sumimasen, watashi wa niku to gyokairui to niku to gyokairui no ekisu mo taberarenai.

Nyuuseihin wa daijobu desu! Watashi ga taberareru mono wa nani ka arimasuka?

I'm vegetarian and this is the handy phrase I utter at almost every restaurant I visit before even looking at the menu or sitting down. It translates to "Excuse me, sorry, I don't eat meat, seafood and meat/seafood extracts. Dairy products are fine! Is there anything I can eat here?"

CONGRATS on making JET and welcome to the Vegetarian life in Japan!

First off, I just want to reassure you, that being vegetarian is not impossible and that I've never gone to the point of starvation. In fact, things have gotten so much better over time when it comes to shopping and access to vegetarian food.

Here are some steps and measures you can take to make you a happy vegetarian:

### **1. Tell people, be open about it, and don't be apologetic.**

Email your supervisor about you vegetarianism as soon as you receive their contact details. This might help them help you!

### **2. Be specific**

When telling people about your diet, be detailed about it. Type up and give them a clear list of your can eats and can't eats. Take note that sometimes, people don't consider seafood/meat EXTRACTS as non-veg, so be sure to add that into your explanation!

### **3. Shopping**

Oh the woes of shopping! Initially, I took AGES because I was having staring contests with the ingredients list. It got better. The best thing to do is to study the kanjis of whatever's a no go for you and memorize them. Also, do make use of the scan function of the **Google Translate** application if you get a smartphone! Some specialty stores (サンビアン in APIA, Inarimachi) also sell vegan instant ramen/meat/tempeh/curry/etc! Stock up on those if you pass by!

#### **4. Eating out and socializing**

Take some time to get to know the restaurants in your vicinity. Try communicating (get help if you don't know Japanese) with the chefs to see if you can get food made for you at the establishment. Make a list of places you CAN visit and you can suggest them when socializing with non-veg friends! Pro-tip: Start with Indian and Italian places.

Many events have been organized by AJET with Vegetarians in mind, so you will usually have SOMETHING to munch on and be happy. Additionally, Toyama Veg/Veg-friendly people tend to hold mini parties too, so give us a shout and we'll pull you into the group!

#### **5. Learn some Japanese**

Some Japanese goes a long way. Learning how to communicate your diet will really come in handy, so my biggest advice is figuring out a set phrase to explain your diet BEFORE coming here or ask your school teachers/other ALTs to help you out!

#### **6. Forgive and forget.**

Despite your best efforts, you ended up eating something with pork gelatin in it. It sucks. It makes the best of us feel terribly upset, because it was that one time you let your guard down around an innocent looking Green Tea Pudding. It happens, and you just have to make your peace with it, and never eat that pudding again. It wasn't you, it was the pudding.

#### **LINKS:**

##### **1. VEGJet Facebook Group**

This group has letters to explain your vegan/vegetarian diet to your school in Japanese especially for enkais. The group also has a super handy all inclusive kanji list for food!

##### **2. [www.happycow.net](http://www.happycow.net)**

I use this especially when travelling around!

##### **3. ME! I'm more than happy to answer any questions you might have.**

A Yagnya

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