

# HIGHLIGHTING *Japan*

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HOW TO ENJOY SUMMER IN JAPAN

# Features

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### **WHERE TO FIND US**

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The Japanese have been cooling themselves from the inside for centuries with seasonal foods served on visually refreshing plates



THEME FOR AUGUST:  
**HOW TO ENJOY  
SUMMER IN JAPAN**



From the way they build and arrange their homes to what they eat, the

Japanese have come up with practical and ingenious ways to survive the hot, humid blast of summer. They also know how to celebrate, with fireworks and massive dance festivals, and have great escapes into nature when the heat proves unbearable. Read on to see how people keep things cool in Japan.

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**ON THE COVER**

How to Enjoy Summer in Japan

# THE 25<sup>th</sup> JAPAN-EU SUMMIT

**O**N July 17, Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, held the 25<sup>th</sup> Japan-European Union (EU) Summit in Tokyo with H. E. Mr. Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, and H.E. Mr. Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission. Following the Summit Meeting, a signing ceremony for the

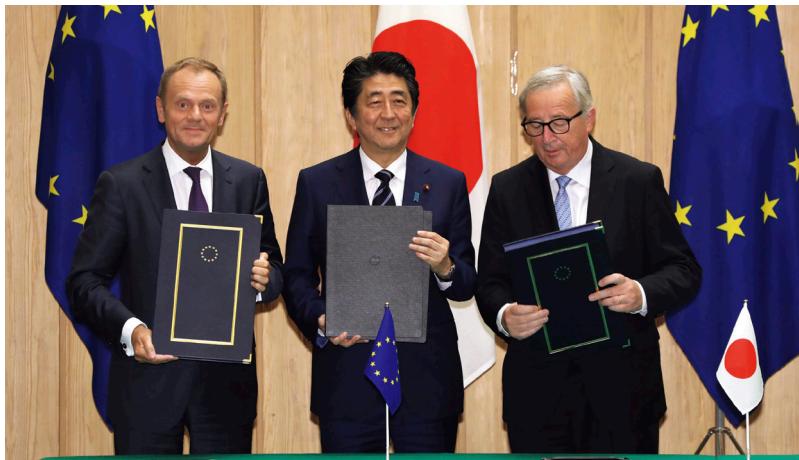
Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) and the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) were held, along with a joint press occasion.

Both leaders signed the Japan-EU EPA and the SPA, as the culmination of negotiations that lasted more than five years.

Prime Minister Abe expressed his recognition that the signing of

the two Agreements is a valuable and epoch-making event that will elevate the Japan-EU relationship to a higher dimension, and explained that amid widening protectionist movements worldwide, the signing of the EPA will vividly demonstrate to the world the firm political will of Japan and the EU to lead the world keeping the flag of free trade waving high. Prime Minister Abe also stated that, with the EPA as a foundation, Japan and the EU intend to maintain and develop multilateral free trade systems centering on the World Trade Organization (WTO), as champions of free trade. Furthermore, with regard to the signing of the SPA, Prime Minister Abe expressed his recognition that the SPA will form the foundation for further deepening cooperation between Japan and the EU, which share fundamental values, for maintaining and expanding the free, open and rule-based international order, and for leading to the peace and prosperity of the international community. Prime Minister Abe stated his intention to further strengthen dialogue and cooperation in a broad range of fields based on the SPA.

In response, President Tusk stated that Europe and Japan are separated by a long distance geographically, but politically and economically they could hardly be any closer. Furthermore, President Juncker expressed the view that the Japan-EU EPA puts fairness and values at its core, and it will set the model for the world.



The signing ceremony



The Japan-EU Summit Meeting

# How to Enjoy Summer in Japan

This month's theme focuses on how Japan stays cool and comfortable in summer. From traditional seasonal rites such as Bon Odori festivals and fantastic fireworks displays to ingenious ways of living and dining devised to stave off the heat and humidity, we'll show you how to make summer here much more enjoyable.



# Taking Steps to Hike Tourism in Japan

## What are Japan's best selling points for tourism?

In many other regions, including Europe and America, there is a rather stereotypical image of Japan that focuses only on things like Mount Fuji, cherry blossoms, temples and shrines. However, Japan also has incredible natural wonders and a wide range of climates, from the subarctic areas of Hokkaido to the subtropical zones in Okinawa. Each region also has distinctive cuisines and traditional festivals. We are showcasing this diversity and the various ways visitors can enjoy the country.

One concrete step we've taken is the "Enjoy My Japan" global campaign, in which we use various

The number of international visitors to Japan hit 28.69 million in 2017, and the Japan Tourism Agency is pursuing various strategies to keep that figure rising. We asked former JTA Commissioner Akihiko Tamura about the current state of tourism in Japan.

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**YUKIKO ISHIKAWA**

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methods to share the charms of Japan as a tourist destination. One facet of that is presenting short teaser videos that showcase Japan's gorgeous natural assets and outdoor activities, hot springs, food and other appealing aspects. These videos have received positive reviews in various countries.

Despite Japan having various cultural assets and outstanding natural resources for tourism, until recently these attractions were not being properly introduced to tourists. Japan's beaches are an example. Japan ranks 61st in terms of land area worldwide, but in terms of total coastline length it ranks sixth in the world. This makes Japan an ideal

Akihiko Tamura, former commissioner of the Japan Tourism Agency





destination not just for swimming during the summer, but also a place with great venues for sporting events, outdoor concerts and open-air movie screenings. We are also thinking about setting up walking paths to create fun coastal walks.

#### **What was your inbound tourism strategy for this summer?**

One strategy is to extend the operating hours of cultural venues such as museums, temples and shrines. This is partly to increase evening entertainment options, but also to encourage people to get out earlier while temperatures are still cool. We are also focusing on the many summer festivals across Japan. We plan to promote them energetically to attract visitors to more rural areas.

Another step we've taken is to create the Safety Tips app, which provides information about disasters in English, Chinese—both traditional and simplified—

as well as Korean. The app provides push notifications such as earthquake early warnings and tsunami warnings, along with tips on how to prevent heatstroke and information about medical facilities.

#### **The government aims to attract forty million international visitors by 2020. Tell us what's being done to reach this target and future plans.**

The number of international visitor arrivals exceeded ten million for the first time in 2013. In 2017 that figure grew to 28.69 million, and as of May 2018 monthly arrivals were 15-16 percent higher year on year, so the figures are steadily going up. To maintain this trend, we need to provide a travel experience that is convenient and comfortable.

For example, trains that link airports to the city should have free Wi-Fi, and small shops where staff don't speak English

should have multilingual speech translation systems in place. We have implemented government grants for lodging facilities to help them update their facilities—such as switching from Japanese-style to Western-style toilets and providing international TV channels—to promote a stress-free experience for visitors.

These moves are not just being carried out with the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games in mind. With the steady decrease in Japan's population, regions need to maintain a certain level of economic growth by increasing the inflow of tourists. Since the tourism industry is one of the few growth areas, it should be considered one of the pillars of economic growth, and 2020 is just one milestone. We plan to continue sharing the appeal of Japan as a tourism destination in many different ways. ■

# FIRE FLOWERS LIGHT UP JAPAN'S SUMMERS

KATSUYA YAMADA

*Fireworks festivals are an essential element of summer in Japan, and the high level of Japanese pyrotechnic brilliance has brought them acclaim as works of art from overseas as well. Discover the origins and secrets to enjoying these bright and booming festivals.*

**N**OW an essential part of summer in Japan, fireworks reportedly came to prominence in 1733 during the Kyoho famine and a subsequent breakout of infectious diseases. The shogun at the time, Tokugawa Yoshimune, commissioned a large-scale fireworks display to dispel unclean influences and evil spirits during the opening of the Sumida River—a ceremony to celebrate the beginning of the cooler season, as well as a memorial for victims of water disasters and a time to pray for protection from such disasters—and the Suijin Festival, meant to appease the water god and ensure the availability of drinking water and water for farming.

Initially associated with funerals, fireworks eventually turned into a fixture at summer evening parties, including ceremonies and competitions. There are many *ukiyo-e* prints of people enjoying these pyrotechnics, showing how they became part of the Japanese cultural landscape.



The invention of the explosives used as raw material for fireworks dates back to China's Qin dynasty (221-207 BC). Saltpeter was accidentally discovered around 200 BC, and in 1100 it was found that mixing it with sulfur and charcoal created "black explosives." This new invention eventually crossed the Silk Road to reach Europe. In 1543, Portuguese adventurers who drifted to Tanegashima—a small island that is part of Kagoshima Prefecture—brought matchlock firearms to Japan, from where the culture of explosives became widespread.

"Explosives arrived as weapons during the Warring States period (1467-1603), but in the Edo period (1603-1867)—with the policy of isolation and hundreds of years of relative peace in Japan—while other countries used most of the knowledge about explosives to develop guns and cannons, Japan applied it to fireworks, which led to a dramatic improvement in techniques," says Kazuma Saeki, a fireworks photographer with deep knowledge about the history and folk culture of the art. "It can be said that fireworks were a symbol of peace."



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Japanese fireworks are highly acclaimed as works of art around the world. They form beautiful, perfect circles when exploding, and can be up to several hundred meters across.

And while fireworks overseas are often just one color, Japanese fireworks can morph from blue to red or red to yellow. Fireworks called “stars” can both change color and form many layers surrounding the core. In addition, artisans attach flutes to the firework shells so that they make a whistling noise before they explode. Fireworks overseas are mostly machine-made, but in Japan they are typically handmade, which allows artisans to incorporate more detailed effects during the process.

Saeki’s advice on the best way to enjoy Japanese fireworks is to get to know the various types of fireworks. The two most common are the chrysanthemum—where the tail remains and the color changes after it explodes—and the peony, where the tail disappears and the color is the same from the core to the outer edges.

“Just being able to distinguish between these two will change the way you focus on and enjoy

fireworks shows,” Saeki says.

The four basic firework colors are blue, red, yellow and green, but recently pastels and colors such as orange are also being developed. However, creating a new color takes exceptional effort, and mixing new, untested materials can even put a firework artisan’s life at risk. For that reason, it took the artisan who created emerald-green fireworks close to twenty years to develop them.

“I’d like viewers to avoid obsessing about filming the fireworks with smartphones and experience them through their own eyes, while fully appreciating the hard work of the artisans,” urges Saeki.

The best place to watch displays of these fire flowers is three to four hundred meters away from the launch pad, in an upwind position. This way you can keep your neck at a less tiring sixty-degree angle, and the smoke will not block your view. However, major fireworks shows tend to be very crowded, and it is difficult to secure an ideal spot.

“There are 8,500 fireworks shows in Japan each year, so if you search you will be able

1 Chrysanthemum fireworks change color after they explode

2 Peony fireworks are a solid color

3 A bright orange fire flower lighting up the sky

4 One of the world’s largest fireworks

5 In Japan, fireworks are still mainly crafted by hand

to find plenty of smaller-scale shows where you can enjoy the pyrotechnics without the crowds,” adds Saeki. He also suggested looking for “hidden spots” so that you can enjoy each firework set off, and deepen your enjoyment of summer in Japan. ■

# The Town That Dances for Thirty Summer Nights

Gujo Odori dancers circling the *yakata* tower

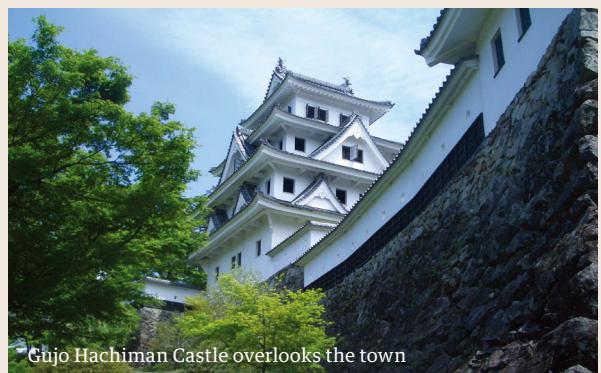
**TOMOKO NISHIKAWA**

*Gujo Hachiman is a castle town in central Gifu that grew up around the fortress of the same name. For the past four centuries, both townspeople and visitors here have danced for thirty nights during the summer at the Gujo Odori.*

**G**UJO Hachiman is a town by the Yoshida River, which flows down from the Okumino Mountains. The Ministry of the Environment has rated these mountain waters—known as Sougisui—as the first on Japan’s 100 Remarkable Waters list. Sougisui is just one of several water sources here, and many waterways run alongside the streets, which is why Gujo Hachiman is also known as “the town of water.”

On the northern side of the Yoshida River, you’ll find many retro *machiya*<sup>1</sup> townhouses. In 2012, part of Gujo Hachiman Castle’s grounds—which include Otemachi, Shokuninmachi, Kajiyamachi, Yanagimachi, and the castle itself—were collectively designated an Important Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings.

Gujo Hachiman’s summer highlight and main claim to fame, however, is the Gujo Odori, one of Japan’s three biggest folk dance festivals and an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property of Japan. It began four hundred years ago during the Edo period (1603–1867) when Endo Yoshitaka, the feudal lord of Gujo, thought a Bon Odori<sup>2</sup> festival would promote harmony among the people. During the four days of Bon, people were allowed to dance together regardless of rank and class. Even now, both locals and tourists take part in this festival by forming a dance circle around a tower called a *yakata*<sup>3</sup>. People



Gujo Hachiman Castle overlooks the town

say that this isn't a dance to watch, but rather a dance where you join in.

The festivities are held annually from mid-July to early September, and are traditionally held over thirty days. This year the festival period will go on for thirty-one days between July 14 and September 8. The dances are held in various areas of town throughout the summer, so the venue changes on a daily basis.

From August 13 to 16, dancers take over the city and continue all night celebrating the Urabone<sup>4</sup> Festival. The dances and music vary, from the elegance of the "Kawasaki" to the fast-beat, mambo-like "Harukoma." There are ten dances in total, but all are easy enough to mimic. During the celebration, Gujo Odori Preservation Committee members provide lessons on the basic steps and tips on dancing well.

According to Gujo Hachiman Tourism Association Secretary-General Reiko Okazaki, approximately 300,000 people attend each year, and the ratio between locals and visitors is about 3:7. "It's popular among visitors from overseas as a casual way to experience Japanese folk customs, and more people are apparently attending the dance lessons each year. One charm of Gujo Odori is the clicking sound *geta* sandals make while you dance. So although there is no dress code, many attendees rent or purchase *geta* sandals and *yukata* summer kimono to take part. Excellent dancers receive a certificate from the Gujo Odori Preservation Committee."

While new leisure activities have drawn the younger generation away from traditional dancing, elementary schools in Gujo Hachiman have been incorporating the Gujo Odori dance into class hours and sports festivals. The city is working to get the local younger generation to protect historical folk culture.



The Sougisui spring's water flows through the town



There are free Gujo Odori classes during weekends throughout the festival

To have people outside of town to learn about the Gujo Odori, the Gujo Hachiman Tourism Association hold events in Tokyo and Kyoto and even at festivals overseas. Each year during the Kannamesai<sup>5</sup> Festival at Ise Jingu Shrine in Ise City, Mie Prefecture, a Gujo Odori dance is performed for the gods, along with Tokushima's Awa Odori and an Okinawan Eisa dance.

"This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary Gujo Odori event in Aoyama," says Okazaki. "It's held every June, and over two days more than ten thousand visitors take part, so it is getting really popular. Like the real Gujo Odori, anyone can jump in and participate. This has persuaded many people to take part in the real festivities here in Gujo Hachiman."

Aiming to be the top *Bon odori* in Japan, they plan to promote the festival through events and performances worldwide. Starting with dance and ending with dance, Gujo Hachiman will no doubt continue to draw more people wishing to experience the festive summer season. ■

\*1 *Machiya*: Merchant townhouses that face the main road in urban areas.

\*2 *Bon odori*: A dance people perform during Bon season events to remember and honor their ancestors, usually held in summer.

\*3 *Yakata*: A temporary tower that people dance around during the festival. Drummers and shamisen players are on the second floor, but at times dancers may climb up top to dance.

\*4 *Urabone*: The official name for Bon, the memorial service for the souls of ancestors.

\*5 *Kannamesai*: A festival at Ise Jingu Shrine in which the year's rice harvest is offered to Amaterasu, the sun goddess.



The Yokkaichi industrial complex in Mie Prefecture is known for its nightscape

# THE OTHERWORLDLY MAGIC OF FACTORIES AFTER DARK

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**TOMOKO NISHIKAWA**

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*The ways to enjoy summer nights in Japan are constantly increasing, but you might be surprised to discover one of the most popular—taking in the fascinating views of vast factories lit up after dark.*

WHEN most people think of ways to enjoy summer nights in Japan, they probably imagine going to festivals and watching massive displays of fireworks. Lately, however, a wider assortment of night tours and events has emerged. The National Museum of Western Art, as well as other national museums and galleries in Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, have extended their hours. There are also night safaris to see nocturnal animals at zoos, and shrines and temples are being illuminated after the sun goes down.

Factory nightscape across the country are also catching the attention of many.

Illuminating massive factories after dark creates captivating scenes that seem straight out of a science fiction movie.

Professor Masaaki Okada at the Kindai University Faculty of Science and Engineering Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering studies technoscapes, meaning landscapes created by manmade structures. “Japan is an industrial nation, and has factories all over the country where you can enjoy these beautiful views,” he says. “Brightly lit chemical plants are particularly striking, thanks to the many pipes which cover the outside of the buildings. I believe it’s a rare opportunity to see this kind of otherworldly scene brightening the dark



Professor Masaaki Okada of Kindai University

night, especially from up close.”

Factories were not purposely lit to create nice scenery, he acknowledges. But lately people have begun to notice their picturesque aspects and found different reasons to value them, which also softens the negative image of industrial plants as a source of pollution.

“From that process, I believe that this appreciation of factory nightscapes is a kind of subculture formed by the public,” he notes.

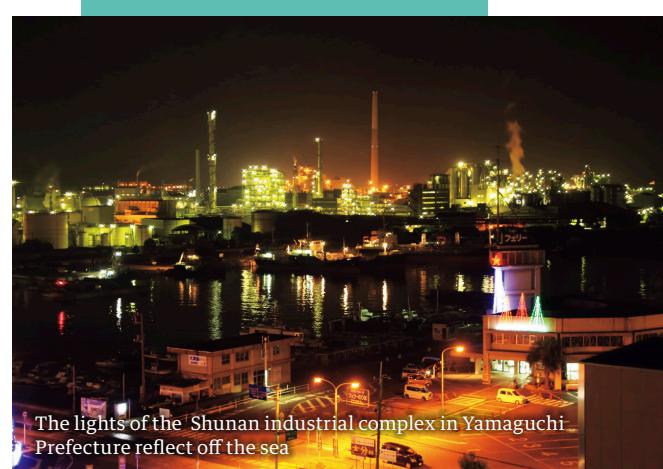
In fact, around the 1980s several photographers realized the beauty of factories after nightfall and began photographing them. According to Professor Okada, the real boom began in the early 2000s and began to pick up speed with the spread of social media and digital cameras. After that, the movement to visit industrial plants at night became a popular form of sightseeing, complete with bus tours and cruising tours. Starting in 2011, local governments with industrial zones, tourism associations and chambers of commerce began to share information annually at the All-Japan Factory Night View Summit, working together to discuss issues and make plans.

Asked which nighttime factory views he especially recommends and their highlights, Professor Okada had several suggestions. “All have their own unique charms, but if I were to pick, I highly recommend the Hachinohe industrial area in Aomori Prefecture, which is well known for illuminating steam and its colorful art events. Another is the Keihin industrial area in Kawasaki, Kanagawa Prefecture—one of the largest in Japan—and the wonderful nightscape visible from the JR Tsurumi Line, which runs by the factories. Shizuoka Prefecture’s paper industry area in Fuji City is also famous for factory nightscapes with Mount Fuji in the background, and the Gakunan Electric Train that weaves through the factory area.

“From the observatory deck of the Yokkaichi Port Building, you can get a 360-degree view of the Yokkaichi industrial complex in Mie Prefecture,” he continues. “And you can see the glittering lights from the Yamaguchi Shunán industrial complex



The Keihin industrial area in Kawasaki City, Kanagawa Prefecture



The lights of the Shunán industrial complex in Yamaguchi Prefecture reflect off the sea



Mount Fuji peeks out from among paper mills in Fuji City, Shizuoka Prefecture

reflecting against the sea from the windows of the Sanyo bullet train. The Kitakyushu industrial area in Fukuoka has a 205-meter-high chimney lit up with LEDs in five different colors. You can see all of these for free, of course, but it’s far more enjoyable if you take part in a tour and learn about the factories themselves.”

There are also courses to explore parts of the factories normally not open to the public. New tours are being put together, allowing more people to indulge in the nighttime realm of factories that show a magically different face from those seen during the day. □

# REBUN

## THE FLOWER ISLAND



Cape Sukoton is the northernmost point on Rebun

*Approximately two hours away by ferry from Wakkanai City in Hokkaido, Rebun Island is especially cool and delightful during the summer as hundreds of types of flowers bloom among its mountains and on its shores, and the surrounding sea offers up delectable fare.*

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**ATSUKO YANAGI**

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**A**ROUND sixty kilometers west from the shores of Wakkanai on the northern tip of Hokkaido, Rebun Island is a narrow isle extending from north to south in the Sea of Japan just northwest of Rishiri Island. Many alpine plants that grow on mountains two thousand meters above sea level on Japan's main

island of Honshu grow at ground level or above here on Rebun, so it is also known as “Floating Flower Island.”

Over three hundred types of alpine flowers bloom on Rebun from the end of May to the end of September. Many tourists visit yearly to see flowers found only on the island, like the Rebun lady’s slipper orchid and *Rebun-usuyuki-so*, a species of edelweiss.

“To experience the diverse plant life and wildlife of Rebun, we recommend going trekking,” says Koji Horiuchi of the Rebun Island Tourist Association.

There are seven trekking courses, and they cover a range of beautiful landscapes. Even casual hikers can explore the island with ease, since the highest peak,

Mount Rebun, gently inclines to a height of 490 meters. Along with the mountain plants there are many wild birds, and the Sea of Japan—which changes its aspect according to the time of day—is fascinating. The panoramic view of Mount Rishiri rising from the sea on neighboring Rishiri Island is also a spectacular sight.

Out of the seven trekking courses, Rebun fans tend to favor the two-hour Momoiwa Observatory course on the southern part of the island. “It has the most flowers in bloom, and is a great course for beginners without many ups and downs,” Horiuchi explains. Meanwhile, the cape exploration course covers the northern area and leads to Cape Sukoton, where you can get a grand panorama of the Sea



The local fishing port viewed from Momoiwa Observatory



A view of Mount Rishiri from Rebun Island



Rebun lady's slipper orchid, a native plant



Rebun-usuyuki-so



Fan columbine



Daylily

of Japan. You can also visit other picturesque locations like Cape Sukai to see the clear cobalt-blue waters crashing against the sharp cliffs.

Guided trekking tours will tell you about the notable plant life and characteristics of the island and take you to the best flower-viewing spots of the season. Be sure to bring trekking shoes, rain gear and warm clothes, by the way, in case the weather suddenly changes.

Rebun Island is also a treasure trove for seafood. With the Tsushima warm current and Liman cold current merging here, the sea is full of plankton, making it one of Japan's best fishing areas. You can savor a variety of seasonal seafood throughout the year, which during the summer includes kelp, sea urchin and the arabesque greenling. There is also a "sea urchin cracking experience center" on the eastern side of the island, operated by the Ship and Fishery Cooperatives, where only in summer you can open and eat freshly harvested sea urchin. The sweet flavor of fresh sea urchin that melts in your mouth leaving a trace of ocean scent is simply exceptional.

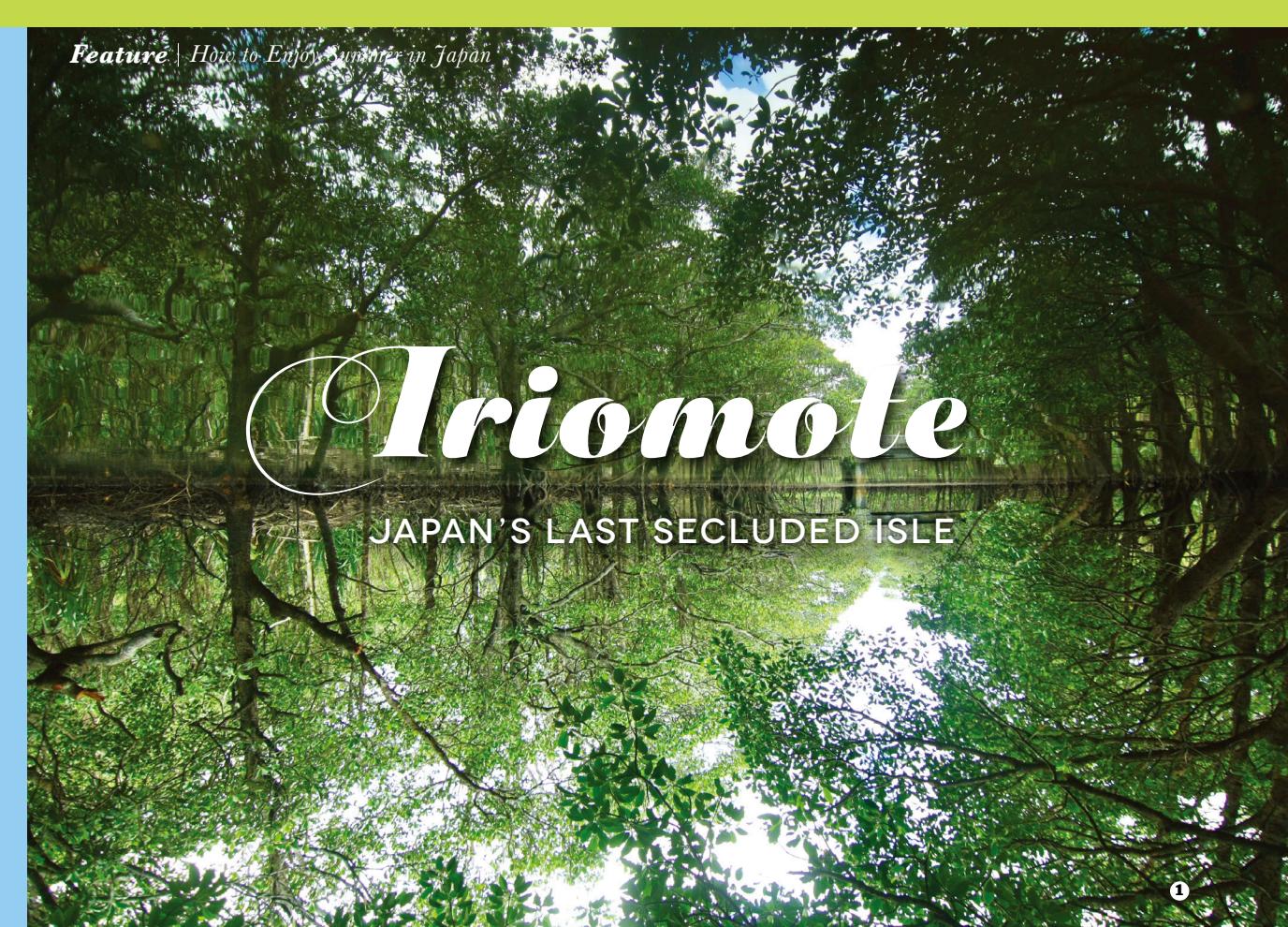
Summer mornings on Rebun Island start with harvesting sea urchin while the waves are calm. If you'd like to see the daily routines on the island, why not take a morning walk along the shore?

"We spot many tourists talking to the local fishermen," Horiuchi says. "Such fishing scenes are normal for us, but it is an unusual sight for many tourists, and that makes us very happy. The people on the island are very kind, so if you have any questions, please ask and talk with them."

Add the island's pleasant temperatures to the rare wildflowers and the chance to sample the bounty of the surrounding seas, and you can see why a journey to Rebun Island would be a memorable one. □



The island is known for delicious fresh sea urchin and abundant seafood



# Iriomote

JAPAN'S LAST SECLUDED ISLE

Known locally as Iriomotejima, this remote Okinawan island is almost entirely covered in virgin subtropical forest and mangrove trees, and is often called “Japan’s last secluded island.” Iriomote is also home to rare plants and animals, such as the Iriomote wildcat, and possesses a singular charm all its own.

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**TOMOKO NAGATA**

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THE Yaeyama Archipelago is comprised of a number of beautiful islands that lie four hundred kilometers southwest of the main island of Okinawa. Iriomote is one of them, and is actually the second-largest island in Okinawa Prefecture. Virgin forest still covers ninety percent of Iriomote.

People have been living on Iriomote since ancient times—the first are thought to have settled around five thousand years ago—and rice has been cultivated here for over five hundred years. The annual Shichi Festival—which is also five centuries old—is a ceremony to give thanks to the gods for a bumper harvest, and takes place in the Sonai and Hoshitate districts.

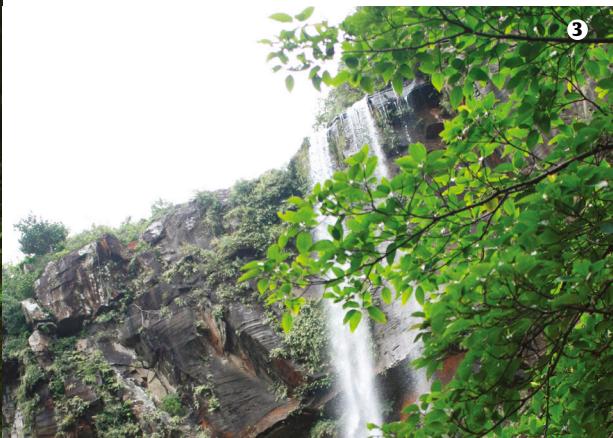
The islanders have fostered a culture of sustainability, only taking from nature what they need to live. Plants removed while tending to the subtropical forest are made into yarn or cloth, and the islanders always show their gratitude toward nature. When the Ryukyu wild boar hunting season is over, for example, hunters offer a boar’s head to the sea to pray for a successful hunt next year.

“The allure of Iriomote is undoubtedly the overwhelming abundance of nature,” says Harumi Tokuoka of the Iriomote Island Ecotourism Association. “Particularly the mangrove forest, which is Japan’s largest.”

The river that flows down to the sea through dense jungle and the lowland mangrove forest changes from fresh water to brackish in the mangrove swamp, and then to seawater. The roots of the mangrove trees provide the perfect hiding place for small fish, and over four hundred species of fish make their home in the island’s largest river, the Urauchi .



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A river cruise is the best way to see the mangrove forest. Pleasure boats travel up and down the Urauchi River on the north side of the island and the Nakama River on the south. There are also many rambling tours available that combine hiking and canoeing. A popular spot along the way is Pinaisara Waterfall, which cascades from fifty-five meters up. Another hiking tour takes in Mariyudu Waterfall and Kanpirei Waterfall, and is perfect for fledgling hikers, since you take the Urauchi River cruise and walk from the boat's landing point to the falls. More experienced hikers can trek as far as Mayagusuku Waterfall, which Tokuoka describes as "simply magnificent."

The snorkeling on Iriomote is also magnificent. Hoshizuna Beach, at the island's northern tip, gets its name from the star-shaped "sand" there (which actually consists of tiny shells), since *hoshi* means star in Japanese. The sea here is shallow and calm, making it perfect for families.

Along with Hoshizuna, Ida Beach on the island's west side is an excellent, uncrowded snorkeling spot. This pristine beach can only be reached by boat, but are well worth the time and effort. Another spot which has been getting a lot of attention is Barasujima, just offshore from Uehara Port. Known as "The Miraculous Island," Barasujima is formed from white coral and is known as a great photo spot.

You can encounter many kinds of creatures on Iriomote, including stag beetles, a perennial favorite among Japanese children. If you like birdwatching, ask a local guide to take you to see the crested serpent eagles. Another is the rarely seen Iriomote wildcat, a protected species. Since it is a primarily nocturnal beast, take one of the evening tours, such as the starwatching tour, and you may catch a glimpse of one.

Iriomote was showcased in the French travel magazine GEO in 2016, and the number of tourists visiting Japan from Europe and other regions is on the rise. Cruise ships anchor at the island of Ishigaki, the main hub of the Yaeyama Archipelago, and airlines from Japan, Mainland China and Hong Kong stop at New Ishigaki Airport.

Since the island's culture grew in tandem with nature, the Iriomote Island Ecotourism Association emphasizes this aspect and runs regular seminars for islanders and guides. "I would love to be able to address visitors to the island and ask for their cooperation in protecting the island's natural wonders," Tokuoka says. "I'd like to impart the mindset of looking after the island to others, and have those who share this vision do the same." ■

- 1 Iriomote is home to the largest mangrove forest in Japan
- 2 A majestic adult crested serpent eagle
- 3 The spectacular fifty-five-meter Pinaisara Waterfall
- 4 Praying for an abundant crop at a traditional harvest festival on Iriomote
- 5 Made entirely from white coral, Barasujima is a popular photo spot

Photos by Elly Sugita

# JAPAN'S SUMMER FOOD AND DINING WISDOM

**YUKIKO ISHIKAWA**

**A**LMOST every region of Japan endures stifling heat and humidity in summer, and so the knowledge of which foods help fight off the summer heat is firmly rooted here. Summer vegetables such as eggplant, cucumber and melon, for example, can reduce heat built up inside the body and are commonly eaten in summer.

"The main ingredient in today's recipe, spaghetti squash, is an oval-shaped, yellow gourd vegetable reportedly effective at cooling the body," says Sadaharu Nakajima, owner and chef of Japanese cuisine at Shinjuku Kappo Nakajima. "If you want to beat the hot weather, it's essential to eat things that are in season. And while it depends on the customers and the restaurant,

we often serve cold things in the summer."

Chef Nakajima has made two summer dishes to sample. The first is midsummer *shijimi* clams and spaghetti squash in white vinegar the refreshing bite of the vinegar and soy sauce dressing and Sichuan peppers reinvigorate heat-fatigued bodies. Summer *shijimi* clams known as "midsummer *shijimi* clams" are a seasonal ingredient. The second dish is summer vegetables and seafood with a gelée of *kombu dashi* broth, which makes use of a cold, simply flavored *kombu* gelée.

According to cooking expert and registered dietitian Yukari Igarashi, consuming these two dishes offers various health benefits.

"The spaghetti squash is rich in potassium, which can reduce excess heat stored in the body," Igarashi states. "*Shijimi* clams are rich in protein and contain many different minerals, so they're considered effective at staving off heat exhaustion. There's even an



Sadaharu Nakajima, owner and chef of Japanese cuisine at Shinjuku Kappo Nakajima



*For centuries, Japanese people have used various bits of knowledge and folk wisdom to stave off the summer heat. Here are some foods and dining hints passed down for generations that can help you survive and even thrive during summer in Japan.*



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3



4

old saying, ‘Midsummer clams are stomach medicine,’ which proves just how much they have been consumed in summer for so long. The vinegar improves intestinal function and controls the incidence of free radicals which can be a source of fatigue leading to a body more resistant to exhaustion. The Japanese tiger prawn used in the second dish has protein, and the young corn has vitamin C, both of which lead to a stronger immune system.”

Igarashi adds that there is no way long-ago generations understood why it’s good to eat summer vegetables and midsummer *shijimi* clams in summer the way modern people do, since nutritional science didn’t exist then.

“However, we have old sayings such as ‘Eat the first product of the season and you’ll live 75 days longer’ and ‘To eat the first product of the season brings a good omen,’ which prove that our ancestors ate seasonal foods. They couldn’t obtain vegetables regardless of season the way we can now, so it was natural for them to eat the highly nutritional foods in season, which we

can guess was connected to preserving health,” Igarashi notes.

Somen noodles are a cold food often seen on family dining tables in Japan. The long, thin noodles made of kneaded wheat flour slide easily down the throat and are a popular summertime dish.

Eel is another type of food often eaten in summer. According to Chef Nakajima, this is because in the Edo period (1603-1867), Hiraga Gennai (1728-79)<sup>\*1</sup> recommended that people eat eel on the Midsummer Day of the Ox<sup>\*2</sup>. “This is a leading theory, but eels are in season from fall to winter, so I think they taste best then,” he adds.

Another characteristic of Japanese summertime foods is that they are arranged on plates with colors that are cool and refreshing to the eye.

“In the summer we use glass dishes as well as ceramic plates that give off a cooling aura, such as Arita ware, which has a trademark translucent quality. We also pay attention to color, and we recommend choosing white and green tableware for their cooling aspect,” Chef Nakajima explains.

1 The summer vegetables and seafood *kombu dashi* gelée inside a striped all-purpose bowl exude coolness from the gelée. The sea urchin was lightly steamed in a convection oven at no higher than 70°C (158°F) so that its taste would not be overwhelming.

2 Midsummer *shijimi* clams and spaghetti squash in white vinegar, with the white of the glass dish and the dressing produce a cooling effect. On top are Sichuan peppers, picked at the start of spring and pickled, producing a vibrant green hue.

3 Although eel is a popular summer dish, it is actually in season during the fall and winter

4 Chilled somen noodles are a summer staple in Japan

To get through the sizzling Japanese summer, we recommend that you eat lots of summertime seasonal foods while enjoying how refreshing they look on the plate. ■

\*1 Hiraga Gennai was a man of many faces—a geologist, Dutch scholar, ballad and drama writer, inventor and copywriter.

\*2 The Midsummer Day of the Ox is a day based on the old Japanese calendar.

# Various Ways to Stay Cool at Home in Summer

AO YAMAMINAMI

For centuries, Japanese houses have incorporated various ingenious ideas to keep them cooler in the blistering heat and humidity of summer. Rearranging the home in early summer and using materials and items suitable for the season also allow people to live in cool comfort.

SUMMER in Japan is characteristically hot and humid. It's written in an old book that "when building a house, make living in the summer a priority." Houses from past times exemplify such wisdom, and were designed to thwart summer's heat and humidity,

Atsushi Kasuya, a first-class architect and founder and representative of Kasuya Architects' Office, explains. "The measures that should be incorporated into a home are to avoid too much direct sunlight and ensure that there is a way for a breeze to pass through and prevent a buildup of humidity," he says. "In addition, the thatched roofs with deep eaves and simple room layouts with no corridors that we see in old houses can be considered uniquely Japanese ideas."

Thatched roofs made with the stems and leaves of plants like Japanese silver grass or reeds—built up to around eighty centimeters thick—have very high insulating properties and block the sun's heat. The



These screens on the top two floors allow light to pass through but block direct sunlight  
Photo by Masaya Yoshimura

deep eaves at the ends of the roof also prevent sunlight from reaching indoors. A singular feature found in old houses is that they have no corridors, and simply opening the sliding doors that separate areas such as the *doma* (an earthen-floored entrance space) and the *hiroma* (main room) allows breezes to pass through the structure.

Kasuya mentions that modern houses also employ similar measures against heat. "When left open, sliding doors allow more of a breeze to pass through, and unlike some Western-style doors don't get in the way. Because they are beautifully self-contained, I often incorporate them in the windows and partitions of houses that I design."

"In the summer, the use of *kumiko* joinery partitions made of thin wood without any nails or fittings allows a good breeze to flow, and lends the place a refreshing appearance as well," he continues. "Having a layout that doesn't divide the space up into many sections creates a more open and comfortable expanse, and not only



Kumiko joinery partitions don't require nails or fittings, and allow breezes to flow through the house



Choosing materials like linen, rattan and rushes helps give a feeling of coolness in the summer



The deep eaves of traditional Japanese houses help provide shade and keep the interior from heating up



Sliding doors are both beautiful and a good way to maintain airflow  
Photo by Masaya Yoshimura

provides good indoor ventilation but also improves the effectiveness of air conditioning throughout the building.”

New building materials are also helping to defeat the summer heat. “Deepening the eaves to block direct sunlight is done mainly on the south side of buildings, but it is harder to do this for the evening sun coming from the west,” Kasuya notes. “For condominiums that I’ve worked on, we set up screens of white fiberglass on the south and west balconies. These screens block direct sunlight, but since they are translucent they still allow natural light into the rooms.”

Meanwhile, when it comes to daily life, many families rearrange their homes by incorporating cooling materials and items as the summer approaches.

“By switching out rugs, table linens and other soft furnishings with highly absorbent materials that have a silky feel, like linen, rattan and rushes, it

will feel cooler even in the middle of summer,” says Koto Nirei, the shop manager of Kurashinokatachi. These days there are innovative and modern products created from time-honored Japanese materials, in a range of colors and designs that blend in perfectly with today’s interiors. In addition, placing glassware on a dining table or hanging a wind chime in the eaves provides the eyes and ears with a wonderful sensation of coolness.”

Mosquito nets, which have been used to repel insects since ancient times, are also enjoying a resurgence as an item that promotes cool living. “Using pure linen cloth lowers the humidity and effective temperature inside the net, allowing for more comfortable sleep,” Nirei explains.

Using traditional architectural strategies to keep homes breezy and incorporating interior furnishings that give a sense of coolness are not only ways to beat the heat, but also examples of wisdom about how to make the most of the summer season. ■

KATSUYA YAMADA

To mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Japanese immigrants landing on Honolulu's shores, Hawaii is putting on a host of commemorative events during 2018.

# MARKING THE ARRIVAL OF JAPANESE IMMIGRANTS IN HAWAII

Katsusaburō Yoshida, Yonekichi Sakuma, Sentarō Ishii, and Hanzo Tanagawa, four *gannenmono* who made Hawaii their home, circa 1922. The *gannenmono* were the “first-year people” of Meiji era, arriving in 1868. By 1885, less than fifty of them remained in Hawaii, most married to Hawaiian women.

**A**PPROXIMATELY 150 Japanese immigrants landed in Honolulu, Hawaii in the year 1868, the first year of the Meiji era (1868–1912) in Japan. They are called *gannenmono*, meaning “first-year people.” In 2017, celebrating the 150th anniversary of the arrival of these settlers, a group of twenty organizations called the Kizuna Group formed the Gannenmono Committee to represent the Japanese-American community in Hawaii.

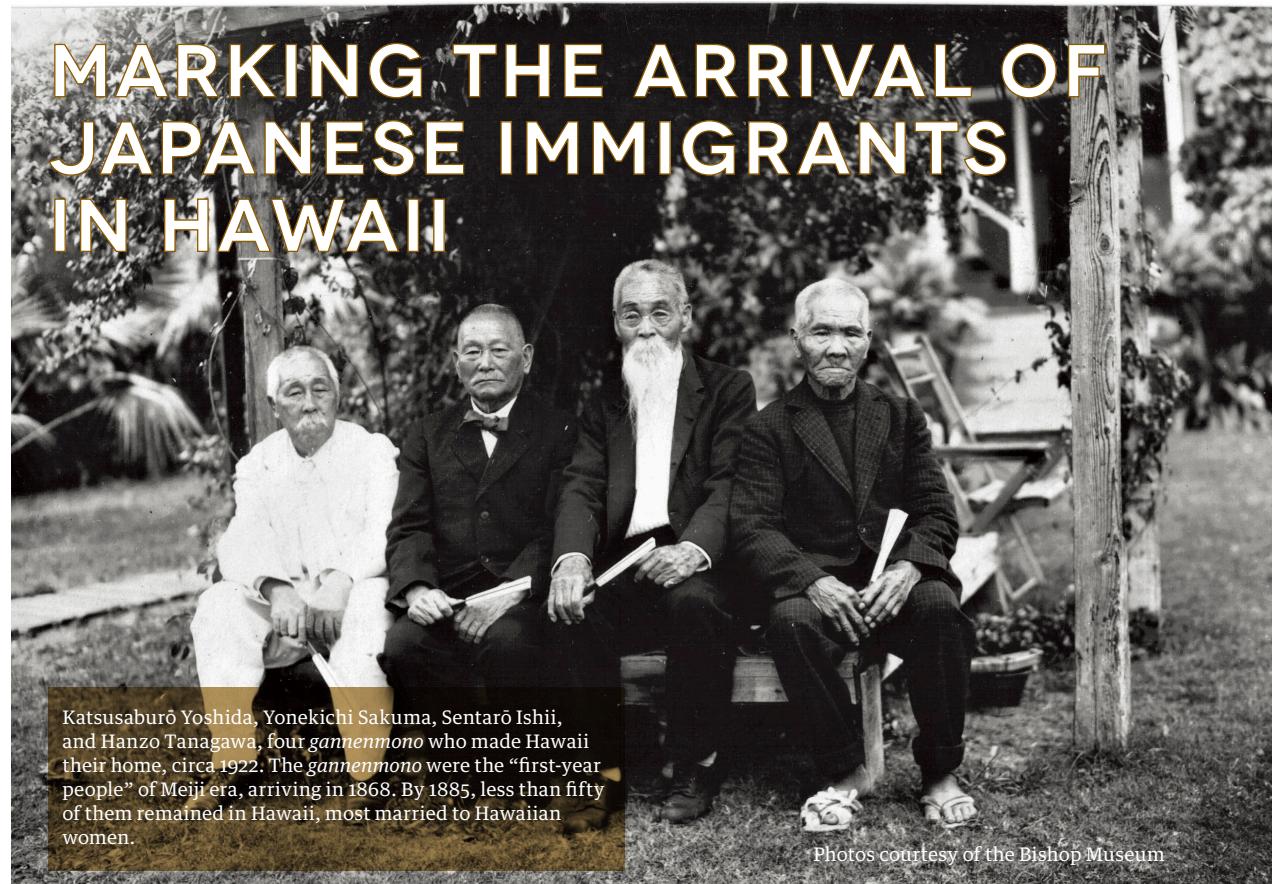
Under the Meiji government at that time, journeying abroad was still illegal, thus making the *gannenmono* illegal travelers. They were treated as lawbreakers and viewed with distaste back in Japan. However, they developed a good relationship with local Hawaiians, and after Japan and the Kingdom of Hawaii concluded the Treaty of Amity and Commerce in 1871, around two hundred thousand more Japanese immigrated to Hawaii between 1885 and 1924, after which emigrating from Japan

was banned by the United States government.

Members of the Kizuna Group that form the Gannenmono Committee are all part of different



A talk session by *Gannenmono* descendants at the Gannenmono 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration/Symposium in Honolulu



Photos courtesy of the Bishop Museum



Photos courtesy of the Bishop Museum



Photos courtesy of the Bishop Museum

The *gannenmono* sailed from Japan to the Kingdom of Hawaii aboard the *Scioto*, pictured above. Leaving Yokohama on May 17, 1868, and arriving in Honolulu about a month later, on June 19, there were approximately 150 of them in all, including six women and a child.

“The Gannenmono: A Legacy of Eight Generations in Hawaii” exhibition will be on view at the Bishop Museum’s Hawaiian Hall until February 24, 2019

元年者 | **GANNENMONO**  
A LEGACY OF EIGHT GENERATIONS IN HAWAII

organizations with their own purpose and mission. “But we all share one common idea,” says Sal Miwa, chairman of the Japan-America Society of Hawaii and one of the three co-chairs of the committee.

According to Miwa, at its peak nearly 43 percent of Hawaii’s population was Japanese, but that has decreased to around 14 percent. “In addition, the majority of those 14 percent do not speak Japanese, and only acknowledge their heritage by their Japanese last name,” he says.

Miwa adds that there are many successful Japanese-Hawaiians, and 37 percent of current city and state government officials have a Japanese last name.

“Many Japanese-Hawaiians are good-natured, hard workers, and do not discriminate or harm others, so they’re not a target of jealousy,” he notes. “Along with demonstrating these positive behavioral traits, our main wish is to leave good memories and pass down the efforts of our Japanese ancestors in Hawaii to the next generation.”

Many events were held to highlight the Japanese-American legacy, such as the Gannenmono Exhibition and Bon-Odori Dance Festival. The main event—the Gannenmono 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

Commemoration and Symposium in Honolulu—took place on June 7 at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel. In addition to a memorial ceremony, the Consul General of Japan in Honolulu and several speakers were invited to give presentations. Tickets to the symposium sold out before the event, and well over five hundred people took part.

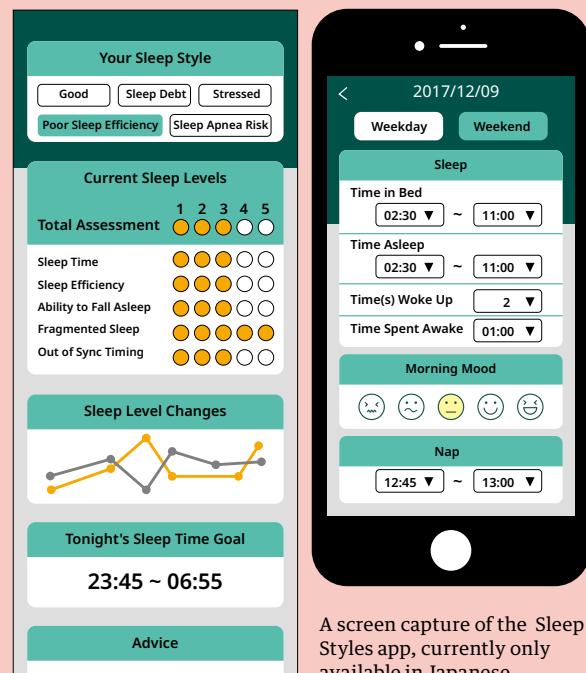
Miwa says that the two main issues the Gannenmono Committee faces are the lack of interest toward Japan among the younger generation and the increasingly advanced age of its main members. On the other hand, many Japanese-Hawaiians do have an interest in Japanese traditions, such as New Year’s celebrations and *shichi-go-san*, a children’s festival celebrating children three, five and seven years old. Miwa hopes these people will be the ones to pass down the legacy and honor the Japanese immigrants who came to Hawaii, and that they will continue to share their heritage and legacy with the younger generation and their descendants.

The Gannenmono Committee’s goal is to pass on the torch to the next generation of young Japanese-Hawaiians who have acknowledged and appreciate the wonders of Japan, and celebrate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary with them. ■

# GOOD NIGHT: USING TECHNOLOGY FOR BETTER SLEEP

BIFUE USHIJIMA

*A good night's rest is a prime source of vitality for the next day, but recently more people are having trouble sleeping. Smartphone applications and wearable devices are helping to combat this, visualizing sleep patterns and encouraging better lifestyle habits that boost sleep quality.*



A screen capture of the Sleep Styles app, currently only available in Japanese

SLEEP—or the lack of it—has been raised as a social problem in developed countries, and is having a deep impact on health. According to data gathered by Teijin Ltd., sleep-deprived people are two and a half times more likely to develop illnesses such as diabetes compared to those who get enough rest. They are also 1.7 times more likely to be overweight, and related research data shows they're also more likely to develop dementia or depression. In fact, according to a survey by an American think tank, the lack of slumber is also having a negative economic impact in the United States to the sum of \$411 billion a year, and in Japan that sum is estimated to be up to \$138 billion.

Teijin launched its Sleep Styles® Sleep Wellness Program in response to this issue, and began offering it to corporations from April 2018.

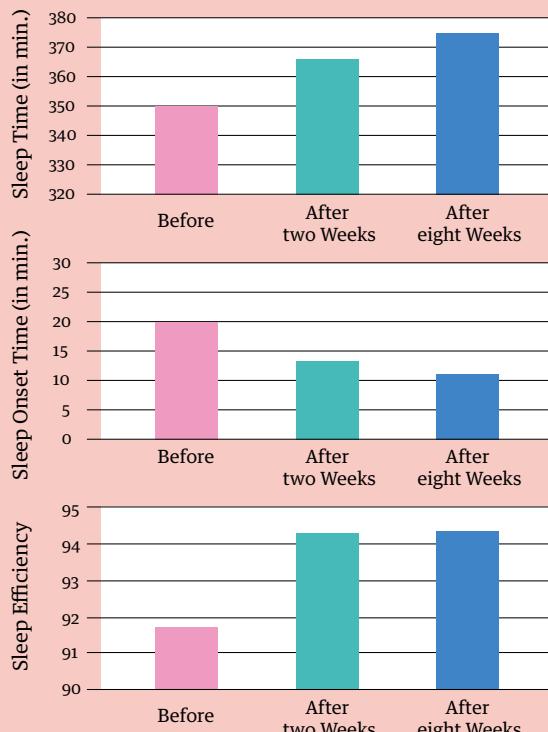
Yoichiro Hamazaki, general manager of the Digital Health Project at Teijin Ltd., explains the

situation. “Sleep is an issue that affects both health and the economy, and for corporations it also has crucial implications for accident risks and productivity. From an operational point of view, managing the health of staff is a strategic move that raises corporate value. Such corporate needs are increasing, which is why we launched this program.”

The Sleep Styles program boosts your ability to sleep via an eight-week program that refines lifestyle habits. It starts by assessing your sleeping habits through a smartphone-administered survey. That data helps to identify your sleep type, then recommends the most suitable sleep wellness method. Using the app, you can continue to refine your lifestyle habits and make regular beneficial changes. There is also an online course to help participants recognize the importance of sleep so that they understand the purpose of making changes.

## Changes in sleeping habits

Results based on a final survey of 54 participants who completed the entire trial (out of 156 total participants).



The “2breathe” device records the wearer’s breathing rhythm and the app emits a sound to help slow that rhythm down

Teijin established five sleep style categories: Good, Sleep Debt, Poor Sleep Efficiency, Stressed, and Sleep Apnea Risk. People with irregular lifestyles who don’t get enough sleep on workdays and try to catch up on weekends fall into Sleep Debt category. Those who have difficulty sleeping despite having enough time to do so fall into the Poor Sleep Efficiency category. To help them, the company developed an original sleep coach app that records amounts of sleep and lifestyle rhythms. Users can visualize their sleeping patterns and make improvements in their lifestyle habits. Those in the Sleep Apnea Risk category have the option to take a simple screening test under the direction of a physician.

Teijin’s “2breathe” wearable device can help those suffering from tension or stress because of work pressures to naturally relax and get a good night’s sleep. 2breathe’s band wraps around the user’s abdomen and records their breathing rhythm, and then works in tandem with an app

that makes a sound to match this rhythm. The sound then gradually slows down to encourage a slower breathing rhythm, which leads to a state of relaxation and then sleep.

According to preliminary tests conducted on Teijin staff, participants who completed the program boosted their sleeping hours and shortened their sleep latency, the amount of time taken to fall asleep. Their sleep efficiency—the ratio of time in bed spent sleeping—also rose. They showed significant drops in stress levels as well, which led to more creativity in the workplace.

“We’re developing a device that can measure the state of sleep, but first we want to reach a level where individuals are aware of the quality of their own sleep and how to improve it,” Hamazaki says.

By improving the quality of sleep, we can expect an era in which people can avoid falling prey to lifestyle diseases and improve their productivity in a virtuous cycle. ■



Owner Alan Fisher

# Bringing a Bit of Ireland to Japan

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**NOAM KATZ**

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*Entrepreneur Alan Fisher shares his passion for Irish culture with people in Japan through his restaurant.*

**S**TEP into Kyojin no Stewhouse (The Giant's Stewhouse) on Tokyo's Togoshi Ginza shopping street and you'll find a celebration of Irish culture lining the walls. When you sit down to order, the staff brings you both a menu and a folder with bilingual explanations about those wall decorations.

More than a restaurant, Kyojin no Stewhouse is the home base for owner Alan Fisher's personal mission. The two-meter-tall Irishman says he started

the restaurant and his overarching Kyojin brand to "help Japanese people connect with Ireland and its culture. There really isn't much knowledge about Irish culture here, and I wanted to do something about that."

Fisher's path to restaurateur was guided by chance. He came to Japan in 2008 as part of an Irish government scheme called the FAS (Foras Áiseanna Saothair, Training and Employment Authority) Overseas Sponsorship Programme, which helped

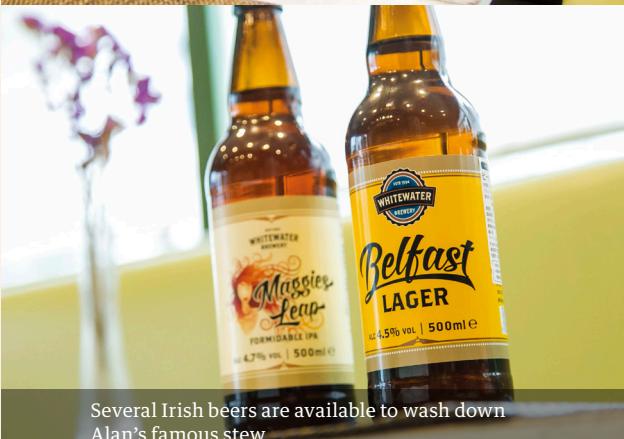
Irish lamb stew is one of the most popular dishes on the menu



The walls are festooned with information about Irish history, art, music and sports



Several Irish beers are available to wash down Alan's famous stew



The bright green sign announces the restaurant's presence on this traditional shopping street



Irish graduates find employment at Japanese and Chinese companies. He was eager to work in a country where English was not the native language and to experience a different way of life. His father's stories about Japanese culture and history had already sparked his interest in Japan at an early age.

With a master's degree in commerce and marketing, Fisher found work in international sales for a large Japanese software company. He spent six years there, often acting as a liaison between Japanese engineers and overseas clients. "It was a good opportunity for me to gain international experience, but it was stressful too," he says.

That stress prompted Fisher to leave the company in 2014. As he contemplated the next bend in his path, Fisher started brainstorming options. "I love cooking and sharing Irish culture, so is there something I can do around these things?" he recounts. "I wanted to bring passion into my work life."

The Kyojin brand concept was Fisher's answer, and he decided to open the restaurant in 2014 as the first step. After scouting various locations around Tokyo, Fisher and his wife were enchanted by the friendly environment of the Togoshi Ginza shopping district, and found a space to launch Kyojin no Stewhouse. "The idea was to use food as a doorway to share Irish culture," he explains. "There are plenty of Japanese-run Irish pubs in Japan, but they don't really offer Irish food."

To fill this culinary void, Fisher decided to offer traditional Irish soups, stews and bread. He started off with familiar favorites—his mother's recipes. "I spent the first six months practicing her recipes every week. I think my wife was sick of stew by the end of it!" Fisher even flew his mother to Japan so she could gauge his progress.

Some three and a half years later, Fisher is pleased with the restaurant's success and is already working on the next phases of his concept. One involves writing a series of novels in both English and Japanese to introduce Irish fairy tales, and the other is an import business for high-quality Irish products, such as beer and cheese.

Fisher stays in constant motion. "I don't really have any days off," he admits. "It's the hardest work I've ever done. But I'm passionate about what I do, and it's either succeed or die trying," he says with a laugh.

This Irish "giant" is connecting his homeland with Japan, one bowl of stew and fairy tale at a time. ▀

# ELOQUENT CHARACTERS

## The Global Love of Emoji

TAMAKI KAWASAKI

*Emoji first appeared roughly twenty years ago on Japanese cellphones, but they're now an essential form of communication for people around the world.*



MOJI were created in 1999 during the development of i-mode, a mobile Internet platform for cellphones created by NTT DOCOMO, INC. The simple 12x12-pixel designs of people's expressions and objects from daily life were made to facilitate smooth visual communication using character data, regardless of screen and message size. Due to staff and time limitations, it was not a professional designer but the development planner for i-mode at the time—current DWANGO Co., Ltd. director Shigetaka Kurita—who led the design effort.

Asked to look back on the struggles of developing emoji with a team of just three people, Kurita had this to say. “Due to using short lines of text, misunderstandings arise easily in digital communication, so it was necessary to add the nuance of facial expressions. It was inevitable that emoji would be born in this day and age.”

In the United States, computer scientists began to use text-based smileys on BBS message boards in the 1980s, and Japanese emoticons (*kaomoji*) were used on Japanese PCs. In communication, people tend to prioritize not the simple words used to communicate but the underlying emotional information, so adding a smiley or heart to the end of a sentence to indicate a positive impression can prevent misunderstandings.

These were the forerunners of emoji. Kurita, however, came up with much more than just faces, adding simplified renderings of everyday objects and information—such as food, vehicles and buildings—to create a fun set of emoji.

Right after their creation emoji exploded in popularity, mostly among teenagers, and by 2004 they were well established throughout Japan. In 2009 they were incorporated into Unicode\*, making them standard characters that could



- 1 Emoji creator and DWANGO Co.,Ltd. director Shigetaka Kurita
  - 2 The original 176 emoji are now part of the collection of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York
  - 3 Kurita's handwritten draft of the first emoji
  - 4 Early drafts of the “worried face” and sunglasses emoji



©NTT DOCOMO, INC.



be used worldwide, and in 2012 they were made available for use on smartphones, accelerating their diffusion across the world. In 2016, the original 176 emoji from NTT DOCOMO's i-mode platform were added to the collection of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. Nowadays emoji come preloaded on iOS and Android devices, as well as on Mac OS and Windows computers.

When news of the addition of emoji to MoMA was publicized, Kurita's social media accounts were flooded with messages of gratitude and congratulations from international users saying that his emoji changed their lives, and thanking him.

“I never imagined that emoji would become this widespread worldwide,” Kurita says. “The Japanese language has multiple types of writing systems such as *kanji* and *kana*, so it’s not strange for emoji to be mixed into our written text as well, but for people whose written culture is more focused

around phonetic language, this was probably a novel concept for them, and they found it new and interesting.

“I’ve been told that in the beginning, people outside Japan would send messages containing just emoji as a kind of puzzle or code,” he continues. “But I think in the end, people in and outside Japan love and use emoji in the same way, and they have become a universal thing.”

Around three thousand emoji have been incorporated into Unicode to date, some twenty years since the birth of emoji. “Emoji will likely remain as long as we have communication that’s limited by a screen and character limits, but if a form of communication such as voice input becomes the norm, emoji might change as well,” Kurita predicts. **J**

\*Unicode: A worldwide standard of character code for displaying the characters of most of the world's writing systems. It originated in North America and Europe.

# Trundling Through a Mountain Gorge and Valleys

*Running through a valley next to the Watarase River, the Watarase Keikoku Railway is a nature theater on rails that offers great panoramic views from retro trolley trains which leisurely chug through the countryside.*

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**SAYAKA KAWABE**

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A journey on the Watarase Keikoku Railway starts at Kiryu Station in Gunma Prefecture. Getting to Kiryu Station from Tokyo Station takes around two hours via bullet train and the local train line. Weaving along the Watarase River valley—from which it takes part of its name—the 44-kilometer-long line runs from Kiryu Station to Mato Station in Nikko, Tochigi Prefecture. During the leisurely ninety-minute ride you can see a variety of lovely scenery. The trolley train is

particularly delightful, with the windows opening directly onto dynamic views of the beautiful gorge, passing through tunnels of greenery and past seasonal flowers while enjoying the refreshing breeze.

The Watarase Keikoku Railway currently operates two types of sightseeing trains. The Torokko Watarase Keikoku train runs on weekends and national holidays from April to November, with a diesel locomotive pulling four train cars, including trolley cars and regular cars. The nostalgic clickety-clack sound of the wheels really suits the many retro-style train stations along the route.

The other train is the Torokko Wasshi train, which has windows so visitors can enjoy rides in the winter too. It started operating in 2014 and runs on most weekends and national holidays throughout the year. It has a train driver's seat for kids and displays destination information in English, features not found in the Torokko Watarase Keikoku train. Both trolley





The train makes its way leisurely through the scenic Watarase Gorge

trains have a conductor explaining the sights (in Japanese only), and they also sell box lunches as well as merchandise featuring Watetsu no Wasshi, the railway's mascot.

There are many unique train stations where you may want to step off for a closer look. For example, four stations away from Kiryu Station (the second Torokko Wasshi train stop) is Omama Station. The station is a wooden building with a retro look. The next station, where the Torokko train unfortunately does not stop, is Kamikanbai Station. Built in 1912, the building looks like it has been frozen in time since the 1920s, and both the station building and platform are National Registered Tangible Cultural Properties. Two more stations down via the regular train is Mizunuma Station, which has a hot spring in the building. Soak in the outdoor hot spring bath while gazing at the gorge for a true only-in-Japan experience.



On board you can buy souvenirs featuring the railway's mascot, Watetsu no Wasshi



Even going through tunnels is fun, thanks to the illuminations on the train's ceiling



Kamikanbai Station's platform and building are both National Registered Tangible Cultural Properties

Eleven stations from Kiryu Station on the regular train is Godo Station. Located in a valley, the station building is constructed of wood, and there is a restaurant inside an old train car where you can enjoy a meal as if you were on board in a dining car. Before reaching neighboring Sori Station, you'll go through a 5,242-meter tunnel, the longest one on the railway. During the ten minutes inside the tunnel, the trolley train projects an illumination show for passengers. While the tunnel is dark like outer space, after reaching the end you will return to the nostalgic landscape of the Watarase River and small towns.

As you gaze out of the window—or step off and watch the retro railway cars weave through the landscape—you'll get a wonderful sense of connection between the train and the dramatic local scenery. This may well be one of the most enjoyable ways of experiencing the beautiful gorge while also getting a taste of the Japan of yesteryear. ■



# AOMORI NEBUTA FESTIVAL

PHOTO BY AOMORI TOURISM AND CONVENTION ASSOCIATION

The Aomori Nebuta Festival entralls millions of visitors every year from August 2 to 7, with brightly lit, intricate and boldly colored floats known as *nebuta*. These gigantic lantern floats are five meters high and weigh close to four tons, and reflect themes from kabuki, history, mythology and more.

These enormous floats are pushed around the city, accompanied by *hayashi* music and *haneto*

dancers who jump in time to the music, chanting “*Rassera, rassera!*” Anybody who wears the official costume can join in the parade. If you prefer simply to watch, there is plenty of space along the parade route, or reserved grandstand seating for a better view.

Several *nebuta* floats are ferried on ships through the harbor on the final night, as fireworks light up the summer sky.

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