

Natalie Emmons

“Jon-nobi” Traveling in Japan



Although born and raised in the United States, Natalie Emmons is a familiar face to many who watch Japanese television. Most widely known as a television and commercial actress, Emmons was recently made an ambassador of Japan Heritage and currently appears as the host of a travel program that shares the beauty and traditional culture of Japan with viewers around the world.

MAMORU SUGIYAMA

WHEN Natalie Emmons first appeared in a Japanese commercial speaking fluent Japanese, her accent was so accurate that many viewers assumed that the commercial had been dubbed over with the voice of a native Japanese speaker. Originally from California, Emmons has been working as an actress and singer-songwriter in both Japan and the United States for several years. Thanks to her experience of Japanese culture, she was able to advise the almost entirely European film staff, of this notorious TV



Natalie Emmons pictured around Japan for the TV show “Jon-nobi Japan Heritage”:

- 1 On the 88-temple pilgrimage trail in Tokushima Prefecture
- 2 At the Agency for Cultural Affairs
- 3 In Matsushima, Miyagi Prefecture

commercial, regarding Japanese clothing style and mannerisms.

During her student years, Emmons developed an interest in Japan from watching anime and Japanese TV dramas with a Japanese friend. Emmons says she was fascinated in particular by Japan’s hot spring culture, old wooden buildings and the worldview that gods exist in all things, as depicted in the animated movie *Spirited Away*. She also loved the simple homemade food she was able to try at her Japanese friend’s house. “I was amazed by flavors I had never tried before and it made me want to experience life in Japan as opposed to only visiting for vacation,” Emmons says with a smile.

In 2010, Emmons’ wish came true when she was cast in a singing role at a major theme park in western Japan. She moved to Osaka and quickly started learning Japanese through conversations with her friends in the entertainment industry. Emmons feels that, “Conversing is the quickest way to learn a language. By listening intently, with your ears attuned to the voices of many different people, you can enjoy experiencing both the language and the culture simultaneously.”

Subsequently, the roles Emmons was cast in expanded to commercials, reality singing competitions, and TV dramas. In 2018, Emmons was cast as the host of a brand new TV show called “*Jon-nobi Japan Heritage*.” The word “Jon-nobi” means “relaxed” or “easy-going” in the Niigata dialect. In the TV program, Emmons visits various Japan Heritage Sites designated by the Agency for Cultural Affairs. In each location, she learns about ancient traditions, architecture, performing arts, agriculture, and often partakes in sumptuous local cuisine. Having visited more than thirty Japan Heritage Sites so far, Emmons says her memories are overflowing with incredible and diverse experiences.

One such experience that remains unforgettable is Iwami-kagura, a traditional performing art in Shimane Prefecture based on Japanese mythology. During the filming of the program Emmons donned a costume and mask and joined the local performance. “I was very nervous, but greatly honored to be a part of such an ancient traditional performing art,” says Emmons. “While I was wearing the mask, I felt a mysterious power flowing through me and when the performance was finished and I removed the mask, I realized my face was covered with sweat and tears. It was a very moving experience unlike anything I’ve felt before.”

Emmons then mentions her wintry afternoon trip down the Mogami River, which flows through Tsuruoka City in Yamagata Prefecture, as another highlight. As a California native with not much exposure to snow, Emmons enjoyed the frosty landscape and local cuisine from a sightseeing boat, while warming herself at a *kotatsu* (a low table with a built-in heating device). “Because Japan has four distinct seasons, there are always changes in nature and seasonal events to look forward to throughout the year. With the “Jon-nobi Japan Heritage” program, I get to see various aspects of Japan’s historical heritage and each experience has left its own unique fingerprint on my life,” says Emmons.

In May 2019, Emmons was appointed Japan Heritage Ambassador by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, in which role it is expected that she will work even more actively as a bridge-builder between Japan and the rest of the world.

Regarding her future plans Emmons divulges, “I am planning to continue working as an actress, but I’m also focused on absorbing unique experiences in Japan and improving my language skills in order to write a bilingual screenplay.” 📖