

March  
2017

No. 25

# The Red Brick Bulletin

Feature: The Sounkyo Ice Waterfall Festival

北海道  
www.pref.hokkaido.lg.jp

## INTO THE LAND OF ICE AND SNOW



Every year in a small town nestled in the Daisetsuzan mountain range, a magical world of snow, ice, and light is born. Because Kamikawa Town is situated in a canyon, the temperatures drop bone-chillingly low in the winter, even during the day. Rather than hole-up inside, however, the town decided to make use of the frigid air to create this magical world: the Sounkyo Ice Waterfall Festival. This year, along with some other Hokkaido JETs, I decided to brave the cold and pay the festival a visit! Despite getting what I think was literal brain freeze, I had an amazing time and it was definitely worth the cold!

Although there were beautiful blue skies all the way from Sapporo to Asahikawa, as soon as we got close to the mountain range, we were met with snow and darkening skies. A few tough souls headed out for a snowshoe adventure, while the less robust of us decided to huddle in the hotel lobby, knitting, chatting and sharing snacks. After our respective adventures in knitting and snowshoeing, we paid a

visit to the hotel *onsen*, or hot spring. *Onsen* is, in my humble opinion, the best way to spend a cold winter day in Hokkaido. The feeling of the hot water and cool snow falling on your skin in the *rotenburo*, or open-air bath, is pure bliss.

After warming up in the *onsen* and stuffing ourselves at the buffet, it was time to gear back up and head out for the nighttime festivities at the festival! The green lights shining out of the canyon made me feel like I was seeing the northern lights, and it was certainly cold enough to believe I was in the Arctic Circle! We went down into the festival, which ran along the river that courses through the canyon. Every building was made out of ice – the workers spray water continuously to build up layers of ice, giving the final products an avant-garde feel. From ice bars to shrines, everything was glowing in the light beautifully. The insides of the buildings were beautiful and yet also slightly terrifying – all of the ceilings were made of sharply pointed icicles!

We stayed long enough for the fireworks, which looked beautiful above the tree line and the ice wall,

but the cold winds were taking their toll. The wind and snow had caused our hair to literally freeze to our heads! I have the misfortune of having bangs, which meant I had hair icicles pressed against my forehead - the reason for my aforementioned brain freeze. We half-jogged our way back to the hotel, dreaming of the *onsen* and yearning to feel our faces again.

As a California girl, these kind of experiences

are what make Hokkaido so special to me. The freezing cold snow blowing in my face, the beautiful world of ice, the *rotenburo* in the snow – these are things I would never have known if I hadn't been placed here in this wonderful prefecture. I am grateful every day to be here, but especially on adventures like this I realize how lucky I am to live here. I'm already looking forward to the next adventure!



The northern light-esque riverside



Watch out for the ice dragon!



The Hyobaku Ice Shrine



Don't look up!!



The views on the snowshoeing adventure.



Into the ice tunnels.

# HOKKAIDO JET SPOTLIGHT

There are over 200 participants of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme who call Hokkaido home. We come from all over the world and we all have a very unique experience with the island. In each edition of the Red Brick Bulletin, I will introduce a current JET living in Hokkaido. Each has their own story to tell – let's get to know them!



Daneille is from Portmore, St. Catherine in Jamaica and has found herself living in Mori-machi, a small, quaint town in southern Hokkaido. Going into her 4<sup>th</sup> year in the JET Programme, Daneille is living life to the fullest – she even once took second place in an all-female Sumo Tournament!

## MEET DANEILLE O'NEIL...

### What brought you to Hokkaido?

**A** To put it simply, a friend. Stemming from a Japanese class in university, my classmates and I were told about the JET programme by our sensei. We all decided then and there that we must go to Japan. As it turned out not all of us got in and those of us who had to wait another year to apply, myself included, chose the prefectures our friends were in. In addition to that though, I've always wanted to know how it would be living in a wintery climate, and so, I am here. When, I got here though, I knew it was the perfect choice. I feel in love with the landscape; it reminded me of home in some ways.

### How has your experience been so far?

**A** It has been much greater than I ever imagined it would be. Never did I think that I would be so welcomed by my town or the people in and around it. I've done things that I never thought I would do or even tried at home, climbed mountains (never doing that again), entered a sumo competition, did a cooking class, just so many things. I can't wait see what this year has in store for me.

### This is a very difficult question, but what has been your most memorable moment in Hokkaido?

**A** Wow, I have a few but I guess my most memorable moment was on my 26th birthday when my Japanese mother presented me with a yukata set that included geta, a handbag and hair accessory as my present. She did this after having already organised a small surprise party. I don't cry easily but I was definitely moved to tears at this gesture.

### What's your favorite thing about your region?

**A** It's a tie between the wonderful scenery and the people. I have a really great group of fellow foreigners here, it's incredible how people from so many different walks of life can coexist so well together, we're a bit like a blended family. I know that a lot of people will say that their region has the best views but I'm very much proud of what I have here. Gorgeous mountains and the some of the most beautiful sakura viewings in Hokkaido (yes, I said it lol.)

### Anything else you'd like to share?

**A** There are so many things that wow me about Hokkaido and Japan as a whole and for the most part it's been wonderful here. However there are other aspects that gave me pause. For instance, I was the first black person in my town and this in itself brought a lot of curious looks and questions as well as some that were offensive.

My first time at my local supermarket, an elderly woman snuck up on behind me in the check out line and just grabbed a handful of my hair. When I turned to confront her she didn't look at me, she just ran away. In my country, and I'm sure for others, you don't do things like that, even if you are curious. I would have preferred to have someone ask me than to run up on me like that.

This is one of my many experiences here that I've shared with my students so we can have a better understanding of each other. They were suitably appalled for me and are now even in the habit of defending me. The fact that we were able to have that kind of discussion as a class and for them to understand that it's not acceptable to do to any foreigner and for them to share this with their friends and family is a very fulfilling feeling for me. I have to say that after that class there was a marked reduction of this kind of thing happening in my town.

All issues of The Red Brick Bulletin can be accessed at [http://pref.hokkaido.lg.jp/ss/tsk/akarenga\\_eng.htm](http://pref.hokkaido.lg.jp/ss/tsk/akarenga_eng.htm)

Published by the International Affairs Division, Department of Policy Planning and Coordination, Hokkaido Government (Edited by Emily Schuster)  
ADDRESS: N3W6 Chuo-ku, Sapporo, Hokkaido, Japan 060-8688 PHONE: +81(0)11-231-4111 FAX: +81 (0)11-231-4303