

June
2017

No. 28

The Red Brick Bulletin

Feature: Sapporo Yosakoi Soran Festival
JET Spotlight: Jiseon Mun

北海道
www.pref.hokkaido.lg.jp



Yosakoi Soran Festival

For five days in June, the streets of Sapporo come alive with thousands of brightly colored dancers and the beating of drums. The Yosakoi Soran Festival began in 1992 with just 10 teams of dancers. Now the festival has become one of the most popular in Hokkaido, this year drawing around 30,000 dancers and almost 2 million spectators. Although this is my 4th year living in Hokkaido, this year was my first opportunity to experience the magic that is Yosakoi. I can't believe I've been missing it this whole time!

Although technically Hokkaido does not have a rainy season, or *tsuyu* in Japanese, most years the Yosakoi Soran Festival is met with rainy or overcast weather. This year was no exception. In fact, it may have been one of the rainiest in recent history!

Despite the pouring rain, the dancers and spectators still took to the streets. I couldn't help but smile back at the energetic and *genki* dancers, giving their all to the performance and never losing their smile. Each stomp of their feet brought up a splash of rain, and each flourish of the flags that some teams used whipped up a cloud of rain droplets. I was soaked to the bone, but still blown away by the performances.

From serious teams aiming for prizes to teams who come just to have a good time, there are all sorts of dancers at the festival. One of the teams I was particularly impressed by was the Russia Sakhalin Team. The team is made up of mostly exchange students from Russia, and their average age is just 19! They brought their youthful energy to the performance, which was a blend of *yosakoi* and traditional Russian dancing. They were all clearly having a blast, which made it one of my favorites to watch.

I also had the pleasure to watch one of the other Coordinators for International Relations (CIR) compete. Jiseon Mun is a Hokkaido Government CIR from Seoul, Korea. She's been living in Hokkaido for over 3 years, and for all 3 of them she's been dancing *yosakoi*. This year she joined *Wakka & SKNOW*, a high level team aiming to take first place in the U-40 Taikai.

Starting from January, the team practiced every week, creating the dance, going over and memorizing the choreography, and learning how to play instruments live during the performance (most teams usually use recordings!) They even spent 2 full days at a training camp just before the event!

Jiseon was so tired after the camp, she slept through almost an entire day.

After all of the hard work, sweat, and I imagine some tears, the team went onto take 2nd place in the competition – I think an incredible achievement for the teams' first time debut on the Yosakoi stage! Congratulations Wakka & SKNOW! I'm already looking forward to their performance next year – it's sure to be intense.

My overall takeaway from the festival was joy. You can't help but smile with the passion and life that the dancers bring to their performances. Even through pouring rain, broken fans and umbrellas, and I'm sure bouts of exhaustion, they never lost their energy. I'm so inspired, that I might even join a team myself next year – wish me luck!



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!



What brought you to Hokkaido?

A I studied Japanese in university, and I wanted to live and work in Japan. After seeing the movie "Love Letter," which is very popular in Korea, I fell in love with the snowy landscape of Hokkaido and decided I wanted to move here. When I applied for the JET Programme, I put Hokkaido as my first choice, and I was lucky enough to get it! Hokkaido is famous throughout Korea for its winter scenery, but actually coming to Hokkaido and seeing for myself, I've realized that it's even more beautiful than one could imagine. And not only in winter, but throughout all four seasons I can see beautiful views. Living here, I've come to love Hokkaido even more!

How has your experience been so far?

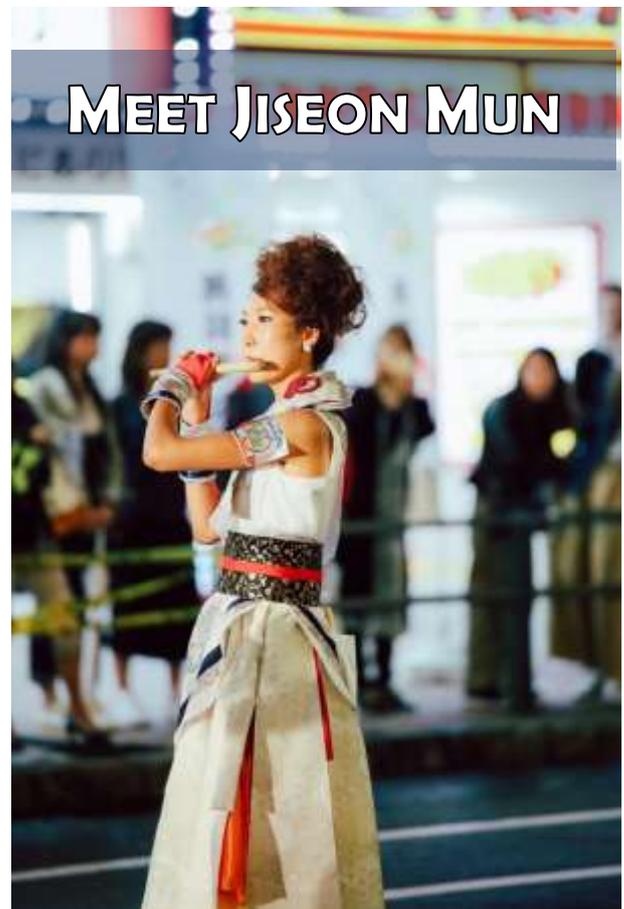
A I'm entering into my fourth year living in Hokkaido, and in that time I've made so many fun memories. In the springtime, I love to eat Ghengis Khan under the cherry blossom trees, enjoying the warm weather after a long winter. In Hokkaido's short summer, I remember snorkeling in the clear oceans as blue as the sky in Shakotan and camping in Furano or by Lake Shikotsuko. In fall, the autumn colors in Jozankei and Noboribetsu Onsen town are particularly beautiful and memorable. In winter, I've loved snowshoeing and skiing through the snowy landscape as far as the eye can see, or trying my hand at ice fishing for Japanese smelt. There are adventures to be had in Hokkaido for every season.

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

A There are so many it's almost impossible to choose! If I were to pick something that's happened recently, I would say that dancing in the YOSAKOI Soran Festival has been one of my most memorable moments. The YOSAKOI Soran Festival is a fun, energetic festival not just for the dancers, but also for those that come to watch, and it's one of my favorites. Three years ago when I arrived in Japan, I was so moved by the festival that I decided to participate and join a team. Now, this year marks my third year dancing in the festival. I wouldn't trade the time I spent day after day practicing and getting closer with my teammates for anything.

What's your favorite thing about your region?

A I love feeling so close to nature. I live in the city of Sapporo, but even here in the city you can see beautiful flowers in Odori Park, and there are tons of fun events held there throughout the year. There are also Nakajima Park and Moerenuma Park nearby, and the Jozankei hot springs area in the southern ward of Sapporo. Even in Sapporo one feels surrounded by nature, but I also love to make trips out to Eastern Hokkaido, especially to one of my favorite spots, Kushiro. There, with the raw natural



environment sprawling in front of me, I feel truly at peace. Anywhere you go in Hokkaido, you can feel close to nature.

Anything else you'd like to share?

A It's thanks to the kindness and friendliness of the Hokkaido people that I have been able to make so many great memories here. My coworkers, the people who were kind enough to participate in Korea related events, the friends I've made through Yosakoi – when I was nervous about moving to Hokkaido to the first time, everyone treated me so kindly. Surrounded by Hokkaido's rich nature and the warm hearts of the Hokkaido people, I live in the best environment. Those of you who haven't been to Hokkaido, please come and visit!

Jiseon Mun is the Korean Coordinator for International Relations (CIR) at the Hokkaido Government. She was born in Seoul, and has now been on the JET Programme in Hokkaido for over 3 years. She loves spicy food, and hopes to eat all of the spicy food she can find in Hokkaido.

All issues of The Red Brick Bulletin can be accessed at 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)
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