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Issue

# The Red Brick Bulletin

Feature: Hokkaido by Bicycle

JET Spotlight: Queena Xu



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Maxwell Stibbard Hawkes worked at the International Affairs Division of the Hokkaido Government between August 2021 and August 2022. In this issue, he writes on the joys of spring and the simple pleasure of life on two wheels.

## The Cycle of Spring



▲ The environs of Matsumae Castle

Perhaps nowhere in Japan is the coming of spring more eagerly awaited than Hokkaido. The iconic cherry blossoms that have become symbolic of the island-nation reach its most northerly prefecture almost a full month after sweeping through the southern cities. While Tokyoites are basking under the blooms in late March, many of their Hokkaidan counterparts are still navigating icy streets or warming themselves under the *kotatsu* at home with a hot cup of tea. It is not until late April that the sea of *sakura* makes its way up to the far north and washes over the stingray-shaped prefecture, painting it pastel-pink from tail to tip.

The arrival of this wave typically coincides with the start of ‘Golden Week’, a string of public holidays kicking off with Shōwa Day on the 29<sup>th</sup> of April. For Hokkaidans, this provides ample opportunity to enjoy the bountiful blossoms, and also attracts many tourists from the south of the country seeking to soak in the spectacular *sakura* scenes all over again. This wave is known as the ‘cherry blossom front’ (桜前線 *sakura-zensen*), and this year I set out to ‘ride’ the wave on my bicycle: pedalling alongside the petals from the southern tip of Hokkaido back to my home in Sapporo. What better way to celebrate the arrival of spring than with a leisurely flower-filled bicycle ride? It would surely be a breeze! I would be gently carried along like a blossom let loose from its tree... or so I hoped. Read on to learn more!

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# Day 1: Cape Shirakami → Setana

The trip begins at Cape Shirakami, the southernmost point of Hokkaido. The cape lies less than 20km from the island of Honshu, which can be seen clearly across the ocean. It certainly feels like a 'gateway' to Hokkaido and an appropriate starting point for an adventure across the island. Cape Shirakami also sits less than 10km from Matsumae Castle, the only traditional style Edo-period castle in Hokkaido and home to over 10,000 cherry trees of around 250 species.



▲ Cape Shirakami, the southernmost point of Hokkaido

This diversity creates an uncharacteristically long viewing window for the famously fleeting flowers, with different species blooming and falling at different rates, and the multiple shades of pink paint a particularly bewitching picture.

After arriving at the castle, I spent a good hour basking under the trees and sampling foods from the festival stalls, forgetting that I had over 160km of pedalling left ahead of me. By the time I departed Matsumae it was already 2pm and the sun – while still high in the sky – was fast making its way towards the ocean.

I set off from Matsumae along Route 228, which follows the southwest coast of Hokkaido. It struck me how closely the scenery resembled the southwest coast of England – specifically, the county of Cornwall. Both regions are notable for their choppy seas, craggy rocks, rolling hills, idyllic port towns, secluded coves, countless wind turbines, and abundant wind.



▲ Matsumae Castle hiding behind the blossoms

This wind would batter me for a number of kilometres until the road wound its way northwards and the gusts subsided, allowing me to better appreciate the stunning, uncannily Cornish scenery streaming past. If it weren't for the Japanese cherry trees adding their sweet, heady scent to the briny ocean air, there would have been little to distinguish the region from its English counterpart (except for the very un-Cornish road signs, perhaps).



▲ A magnificent cherry tree in full bloom

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The coastal scenery lasted until the town of Otohe, where a road diversion took me into the woods just as the sun was setting. Praying not to encounter any bears, I pedalled through the gradually darkening forest and safely emerged just as the sun was touching the sea. My relief at not having become a bear's supper was mixed with the soberness of realising that I still had 75km to cover with next to no sunlight left.



▲ Kosunago harbour

The rest of the day (or rather, night) can be summarised in one word: Dark. I can't describe it in more detail because not much else sticks in the mind. My bum hurt. That much I remember. And I was hungry. But the scenery itself was reduced to little more than the patch of tarmac illuminated by my front light. At least the stars were pretty.

Eventually, I pulled into the hilltop campsite (having inadvertently ridden past it and added another 10km to the journey) by which time it was already 10:30pm. My long-suffering travel companion, who had driven to the campsite and set up the tent, was clearly irritated. I protested that I couldn't have cycled much faster. She said that I shouldn't have spent so much time frolicking under the blossoms in Matsumae. I didn't have anything to counter this so instead tucked into the plate of barbecued *'fruits pork'* and mushrooms (which she'd kindly prepared), then clambered into the tent (which she'd also kindly prepared) and went to bed.



▲ There goes the light

That night I dreamt of dancing cherry blossoms, writhing oceans, spiralling wind turbines, and the mysteries of *'fruits pork'* (which turns out to be pork from pigs that have been fed a diet rich in fruit before slaughter, not pork fruit grown on pork trees.) Even though the pedalling had stopped, my mind kept turning: 180km of coastline playing back through my head as I drifted off to sleep. It was, in theory, the longest and most gruelling day of the trip. I certainly hoped the next day would be kinder.



▲ Ocean sunset



▲ Wind turbines



▲ A jolly, stripy lighthouse



▲ The view from Kosunago



▲ Roadside sakura

## Day 2: Setana → Kuromatsunai

Day 2 began with a rather rude awakening: the tent was attempting to eat us. It turns out that pitching up on an exposed hilltop surrounded by wind turbines brings with it the possibility of... wind. And what wind! Early that morning, the tent had independently concluded that three dimensions were one too many and attempted to pack itself away with us still inside. Taking the hint, we climbed free of our polyester sarcophagus and managed to just barely avoid mummification in our sleeping bags.



▲ Our sad, flattened tent

The one good thing about being awoken by a morning gale was that it ensured I was on the road significantly earlier than the previous day. There were few distractions in the nearly deserted campsite and the possibility of sleeping in was ruled out by our carnivorous accommodation. I managed to depart before 10am – a minor miracle for an exhausted night-owl like myself.



▲ The ocean road under brooding skies

The second day held a mere 80km of pedalling – less than half the previous day's length – and should have been fairly straightforward. Unfortunately, the route also headed straight *up* at many points, and despite its relatively short length managed to pack in almost 1,500m of ascent. As a primarily coastal route, I had naïvely assumed that I would be at 'sea level' for the most part, with little in the way of climbing. After hauling myself over the numerous hills and mountains *en route* to the Kuromatsunai campsite, I was no longer of this opinion.



▲ A mountain stream heading to the ocean

The scenery between Setana and Kuromatsunai was attractive (in a brooding, overcast way), but the previous day's fatigue meant that I was more concerned with getting to the *onsen* at the end of it than stopping to enjoy the views. Thankfully, the *onsen* itself did not disappoint, and the early departure and relatively short route meant that I had plenty of time to rest my weary bones in its alkaline waters. I ended up spending over two hours soaking in the bath, and emerged well-rested and wrinklier than a pickled plum.

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Dinner that night was an assortment of *combin* *bentos* which we ate crouched in front of a burning log while sheltering from the rain under a tarpaulin canopy. 'Glamping' it was not, but we at least had the luxuries of food, warmth, and shelter.

...More or less.



▲ Our shelter for the night

The burning log (or 'Swedish Torch', as it was advertised) unfortunately refused to stay alight without constant attention, and bites of food were interspersed with bouts of blowing into the log's smouldering core to stop it from fizzling out altogether. I'm fairly sure the amount of energy it took to keep the flame alive surpassed the amount of heat that we got back from the fire, but the sheer effort of constant huffing and puffing at least kept our body temperature nice and high (...not that I was really in need of more physical exertion).

Eventually, we gave up on the fire and went to bed. After two days of cycling, a long bath, and a hearty *combin* supper, fatigue soon caught up with me and I was out like a log in mere seconds – much like the actual log which snuffed itself out almost as soon as we stopped tending to it.



▲ Snow at the Kuromatsunai campsite

With two days down and one remaining, the end of the trip was fast approaching.



▲ The uncooperative 'Swedish torch'



▲ One of many interesting rock formations *en route*



▲ The scenery near Kuromatsunai

## Day 3: Kuromatsunai → Sapporo

I woke up the next morning as stiff as a plank. Either my body had successfully entered 'recovery mode' and simply needed waking up... or it had powered down completely. I prayed it was the former. A mountainous 150km lay between me and home, and this was not a day to be running on fumes.



▲ Campsite porridge

Thankfully, despite spending the morning waddling around the campsite like a frozen penguin, my body began to loosen up once I got on the bike and started pedalling. There was some residual fatigue, but the time spent in the bath the day before had clearly gone some way to smoothing my aching limbs. At the very least, I felt much livelier than I had the previous morning. Not being awoken by a tent-flattening gale probably also helped. Even the rain had largely abated, and the heavens were decorated with an attractive patchwork of bright white and deep grey clouds, billowing merrily across brilliant blue skies.



▲ Demon Slayer haybales

The scenery on the last day was also remarkably different from the coastal vistas I'd grown accustomed to over the previous two days. Instead of pedalling past secluded beaches and harbours, I found myself whizzing through forests and farms. The scent of sea spray was replaced with the aroma of agriculture: a hearty mix of tilled soil, rich verdure, and the distinctive tang of fresh manure.



▲ New life bursting through the earth

If the start of the trip was reminiscent of England's south, the final day brought to mind the country's north, with its many hills, pastures and pine forests. This was less Cornish coastline and more Cumbrian countryside. Even the weather was doing its best to channel northern England: the skies constantly shape-shifting and the threat of rain never far away.

This threat would remain at bay until I reached the foothills of Mt. Yotei, where the heavens opened and I found myself pedalling – or perhaps paddling – through



a squall of biblical proportions. Though my rain jacket held up admirably, the rest of me was soaked through in seconds. My very un-waterproof shoes and gloves (which had previously provided a thin but sufficient barrier against the chilly mountain winds) were rendered completely useless: the sodden material now drawing heat away from the body instead of keeping it locked in.

Realising that my extremities would need another layer of protection if I wanted to maintain feeling in my fingers and toes, I pulled into a nearby *combin*i and bought 50 pairs of polyethylene gloves and a large assortment of sweets. As someone with only two hands, perhaps I didn't *need* 100 gloves for the last leg of a three-day trip, but the *combin*i left me with no other option. After applying one glove to each hand and foot, I stuffed the remaining 96 into my bike bag, shoved a *daifuku* into my mouth, and set off to climb the formidable Nakayama Pass.



▲ The oncoming squall

Despite their flimsy construction and disposable nature, the gloves performed admirably. My extremities were no less wet, but were at least significantly more windproof: the thin layer of plastic creating an effective barrier against the elements. As polyethylene is not the most breathable of materials, my woollen gloves and socks became even soggy as I started to perspire, and my hands and feet were soon swimming in a warm soup of rainwater and sweat. Perhaps not a very appealing description, but infinitely preferable to suffering the

piercing wind – and with the temperature falling as I climbed further up the mountain pass, I was grateful for any warmth I could get.

Around halfway up the pass, the rain ceased. Or rather, it ceased to be rain. Instead, sheets of hail came lashing down, pinging off my body like airgun pellets and scattering across the road. For a trip which had started as a way to experience the Hokkaido spring, this didn't feel 'spring-like' – though I was certainly getting a good dose of 'Hokkaido'... There are few other places in Japan where you can expect to be battered by a hailstorm in May.



▲ Mochi mochi power

The higher I climbed, the harder the hail fell. Not far from the top, a man in a black 4x4 pulled over to the side of the road, jumped out, and asked if I needed a lift. I thanked him as profusely as I could in the handful of seconds we shared, but explained that I didn't need a lift because I was "nearly there". I didn't say where "there" was. I didn't really know where "there" was. I was still 50km from Sapporo after all, but after dragging myself up most of the mountain I wanted to finish off the remaining chunk.

Despite pig-headedly refusing the man's generous offer, I was incredibly touched that anyone would stop at all. I must have cut a rather pathetic figure: alone in the hail, struggling up a mountain many miles from civilisation.

Eventually, I reached the top of the pass, where no trace of spring was to be found. Snow lay thickly on every surface but the road itself, and hail continued to hammer down from the heavy pewter skies. Looking around, it was difficult to believe that a few days earlier I had been lazing under the blossoms in the brilliant sunshine.

The only sign of warmth at the summit was the soft glow emanating from the windows of the roadside café. The promise of hot coffee and cake was almost too much to resist, but with the light failing and the weather not showing any signs of improving, I decided to push on towards home. Descending the mountain in a hailstorm would be challenging enough without the further complication of darkness. Cake could wait. The sun would not.



▲ The top of Nakayama Pass

The descent itself was like swimming through the rings of Saturn. Or perhaps taking part in the world's largest watermelon seed spitting contest – as the target. ...Probably. Having never swum through the rings of Saturn nor participated in a watermelon seed spitting contest, I'm not well placed to make either analogy, but the point is, there was a lot of hail coming at me very fast.



▲ On the road home from Jozankei

Mercifully, I made it to the bottom of the pass without incident, and the skies began to clear as I pulled into the *onsen* resort of Jozankei. From there, it was a relaxed ride past fruit farms and forests until the lights of the city came into view. After navigating through the city traffic, I finally arrived home at just after 7pm, three days and 400km after I'd started. My travelling companion was waiting for me at the house with an assortment of doughnuts for us (...mainly me) to eat. It was a wonderfully, doughy end to a wonderful, snowy ride.

When I set off, my main goal was to 'experience' as much of Hokkaido as possible. Not just the major tourist sites, but all the space in between. Within three days, I had experienced everything from the sunny southern shoreline of Hiyama to the endless winter of the Iburi mountains. I had basked under blossoms, bathed in *onsen*, weathered sunshine, hail, squalls and gales, and been burnt, frozen, soaked, and almost blown off my bike in the process. In terms of achieving what I set out to do, the trip was a resounding success.



▲ The calm before the storm at Niseko Kaributo Shrine



▲ The carp streamers of Jozankei



▲ Home sweet home



▲ Post-ride donuts with Kyun-chan



# HOKKAIDO JET SPOTLIGHT



There are about 300 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. Each has their own story to tell – let's get to know them!



## MEET QUEENA XU

In this issue, we introduce Queena Xu, a talented illustrator and keen cyclist, skier, and hiker. She is a fifth-year ALT living in the picture-perfect town of Kembuchi.



▲ Sunset Queena

### Tell us a bit about yourself!

My name is Queena! I was born in California and spent my younger years in China, but came back to be educated in America. After graduating university and working an office job, I still had no idea what I wanted to do. So, just as any other person looking for adventure would, I packed my bags and moved to Japan!

I've been living in Japan for about 4 years now in a tiny town called Kembuchi (剣淵), known for its Picture Book Library (絵本の館) that houses over 4,000 picture books under one roof. (Just a little shoutout to my awesome town!)

I have accumulated different hobbies throughout my life, ranging from art, (drawing and painting, especially in gouache), to outdoor activities (hiking, cycling, running in the summer and skiing in the winter), and mindfulness habits (journaling, yoga, and cooking). But I don't think I'm particularly spectacular at any one thing. I enjoy seeking new challenges and experiences to try.

### What brought you to Hokkaido/Japan?

I was one of those nerdy anime kids that grew up obsessively watching Pokemon, Digimon, Yu-gi-oh, Sailor Moon and more. I loved reading manga and drawing my favorite characters, even creating some of my own. My interest in Japan grew and became a huge influence in my life. After graduating university, I visited Japan with a few friends. It was a dream come true. I loved it so much I visited again in the same year with my mom and sister. It was then that I decided I wanted to work and live in Japan.

## How has your experience been so far?

I have really enjoyed my experience of living in Japan. At first, I didn't think I could get used to living in the countryside, but now I can't imagine living in the city! I really love the simple, relaxing small-town life. I also really enjoy interacting with the students. Since I teach all the schools in my town ranging from kindergarten to high school, I have the amazing opportunity to watch the children grow.



▲ Kembuchi's Picture Book Library

## What has been your most memorable moment?

There have been so many amazing moments during my time here in Hokkaido. But definitely the ones I remember most are the small acts of kindness that the townsfolk have shown me here: neighbors lending me a yukata to wear to my first summer festival, elementary students taking me by the hand to join them in a game of tag, joining the town's taiko group and becoming a part of their family, receiving random letters from students, and so many more. It's the accumulation of these small moments that leave the biggest impression on me.

## What is your favourite thing about your region?

Living in the Kamikawa block area certainly has a lot of perks. I'm both surrounded by the lush countryside but also not too far away from the city, with Asahikawa being an hour's drive away. Having lived in a concrete jungle all my life, being surrounded by nature is what I love most about being in this region. I've developed a new love for outdoor hobbies such as skiing, cycling, and hiking since coming to Hokkaido. The nature here is beautiful year-round. There's always something to look forward to every season, whether that be the spring *sakura*, summer festivals, autumn leaves, or powder ski days. I feel that I won't tire of living here. I can always be refreshed by the gorgeous nature that surrounds Kamikawa.

