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Issue

The Red Brick Bulletin

Feature: A Gourmet Tour of Northern Hokkaido

JET Spotlight: Megan Bisila



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Maxwell Stibbard Hawkes works at the International Affairs Division of the Hokkaido Government. In this issue, he travels around the northern region of Kamikawa, sampling sumptuous local produce along the way.

A Gourmet Tour of Northern Hokkaido

Hokkaido's unique climate and geography are behind much of what makes it such an attractive destination for travellers. Its verdant forests and soaring mountains draw in hikers during the warmer months, and the improbable quantities of powder snow it receives during the cold season make it a world-renowned winter sports destination. This rich and fertile terrain is also responsible for its reputation as a gourmet paradise within Japan – a nation whose commitment to fine dining has produced more Michelin-starred restaurants than anywhere outside of France.

Surrounded by bountiful oceans on all sides, the island receives an abundant supply of seafood year-round, and the vast expanses of arable land in regions such as Tokachi make it well suited for ambitious agricultural initiatives that can't be as easily achieved elsewhere in a relatively space-starved nation. This agricultural real estate also provides the backbone to Japan's dairy industry, with Hokkaido alone producing about half of the nation's milk, much of which ends up on students' food trays as a school-lunch staple. This milk also finds its way into the knob of butter adorning steaming bowls of Sapporo ramen, a variety of award-winning cheeses, and of course, every flavour of soft-serve ice cream under the sun. It might be ingredients like wasabi, soy sauce, or sea urchin that grab the most attention when it comes to

novel Japanese soft-serve flavours, but the unsung hero is of course the milk itself, and there's a good chance that milk comes from Hokkaido.

I recently had the opportunity to explore the northern region of Kamikawa and sample some of its culinary delights. Read on to learn more!



▲ Asahikawa's food-filled backstreets

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Horokanai's Buckwheat Bounty. Soba. So Good.

Soba can be considered the third pillar of Japanese noodles, alongside ramen and udon. Unlike its slinky brethren (which are usually made primarily from wheat flour) soba noodles are notable for containing a significant amount of buckwheat – anywhere between 30 and 100%. In fact, the word *soba* (蕎麦) itself simply means 'buckwheat' in Japanese, though commonly refers to both plant and noodle.



▲ The factory equipment at work

The town of Horokanai is known for being Japan's largest producer of buckwheat and has made the grain an integral part of its identity. Fronted by a buckwheat mascot called 'Horomin', Horokanai hosts an annual celebration of all things soba called *shin soba matsuri*, which attracts tens of thousands of people to sample the town's delectable noodles and also get involved in the creation process – a true buckwheat bonanza!

As might be expected of a town with so much flour on its hands, Horokanai also produces a dizzying array of other buckwheat goods. Upon visiting the local *Michi no Eki, Mori-to-Mizuumi-no-Sato*, we were greeted with not only oodles of noodles, but also buckwheat doughnuts, buckwheat cake, buckwheat-flower honey, buckwheat shochu, and much more besides.



▲ Horomin

We were also fortunate enough to be taken on a tour of the town's soba factory and witness the process by which the plant becomes flour, which requires an impressive amount of very large and very loud machinery. We also saw the storehouse where tonnes upon tonnes of processed buckwheat were kept, cleverly utilising the colossal amount of snow that the town receives in winter to keep the buckwheat cool during the summer.

After an intense morning of touring the town, taking notes, and meeting big-wigs, we had worked up quite an appetite, so headed to a local restaurant for a spot of lunch. As for what we ate... well, you can probably guess!



▲ The end result

A Slice of Suffolk in Samurai Shibetsu

Hokkaido is home to two places named 'Shibetsu': one, a town in the Nemuro subprefecture bordering the Sea of Okhotsk; the other, a city in the centre of the Kamikawa subprefecture surrounded by hills and fields. While both are transcribed identically in English, they are distinguished in Japanese by their kanji representation. Shibetsu-upon-sea is written as '標津' (*shibe-tsu*: literally, *sign-harbour*), while landlocked Shibetsu is written as '士別' (*shi-betsu*: literally, *samurai-separate*). Both are thought to originate from the same Ainu word, '*si-pet*' (meaning 'great river').



▲ The sign to Suffolk Land

During our trip, we visited Kamikawa's 'Samurai Shibetsu' (as it's colloquially known) and while we didn't encounter any real-life *bushi* warriors, we did spot some splendidly bushy fleeces swaddling the sheep over at 'Suffolk Land' – a fully functioning farm open to tourists. Here we saw an impressive variety of sheep breeds from around the world, including the eponymous 'Suffolk' breed which takes its name from the eastern English county. British breeds were well represented overall, and as someone who spent much of their early life strolling through the British countryside, there was a certain déjà vu to being back among the same bleats and baas that had scored my childhood. This peaked when I came across a faded poster of 'British Sheep Breeds' hanging on the wall of the barn – the same one we used to have in our house. I'd never seen it anywhere else before, so finding this piece of home hanging in a barn on the other side of the planet was rather surreal.



▲ What are ewe looking at?

Eventually, déjà vu gave way to hunger, and we headed to nearby *Michi-no-Eki*, '*Hitsuji-no-Machi Samurai · Shibetsu*' for a hearty mutton lunch. Anyone with a passing knowledge of the island's cuisine will know that 'Hokkaido + Sheep' can only mean one thing: *jingisukan* – a meal of sliced mutton or lamb, typically grilled with vegetables such as bean sprouts, onions, and cabbage. We opted for the premium version of the dish prepared with meat from the local Suffolk sheep, which did not disappoint. After spending the day among Shibetsu's verdant, rolling hills – uncannily reminiscent of the English countryside – it seemed only right to finish things up with a real taste of Suffolk.



▲ Suffolk *jingisukan*

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Experiencing Heaven and Earth in Nayoro

▼ Nayorō

The city of Nayoro sits in a basin to the north of the Kamikawa subprefecture, nestled between the Teshio and Nayoro rivers. The northerly location and unique basin climate result in stubbornly cold winters, with an average January temperature of -9.4 degrees Celsius – the coldest of any city in Japan. The two rivers sandwiching the city feed the expansive fields that drive Nayoro’s key industry: agriculture.

grape, shiso, pumpkin, buttered corn, and haskap, to name a few.

After eating one too many of these tender morsels, we headed off to the Nayoro City Museum to learn about the region’s history. Here we



witnessed the tremendous physical efforts necessary to make the land suitable for agriculture, and the means by which people of the time had survived the bitterly cold winters. After we had left the museum and climbed back into the warm confines of the car, I took another mochi out of its box and chewed on it slowly, thinking of everything that had happened to bring it into existence. A lot of hard graft had clearly gone into cultivating this land of soft *daifuku*.



▲ The softest of all Vikings

It may seem unlikely for an area carpeted in snow for much of the year, but with the coming of summer, these previously white fields are transformed into a radiant sea of yellow as tens of thousands of sunflowers rise from the earth and bloom. Nayoro also happens to be Japan’s largest producer of *mochi* rice, and these small glutinous grains play a big role in shaping the city’s character. Much like Horokanai’s buckwheat mascot, *Horomin*, Nayoro has its own carbohydrate-based character in the form of *Nayorō*, a jolly, mochi-bellied boy with a passion for stargazing.



▲ Daifuku on display

Much of this *mochi* rice finds its way into *mochi* rice cakes, and we had the pleasure of tasting these glutinous delights at *Michi-no-Eki*, ‘*Mochigome-no-sato Nayoro*’. Here we came across a sign bearing the words, ‘Soft Daifuku Viking’, which brought to mind the image of a rather portly Nordic pirate, but in fact referred to an incredible selection of squishy, bean-paste filled sweets. These came in every flavour imaginable: melon, cheese,

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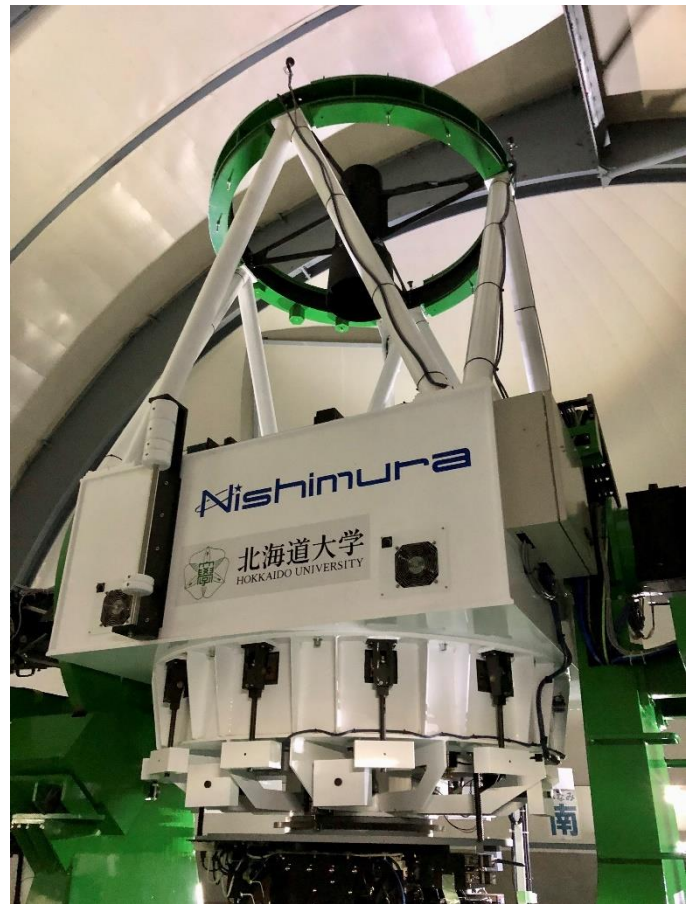
Our final destination of the day took our thoughts away from the earthy toils of agriculture, and into the heavens themselves. Nayoro's crisp, clean air makes it the perfect place for stargazing, and just outside of the city lies an impressive astronomical observatory known as Kitasubaru, home to Japan's second-largest telescope by aperture. The name of this telescope is 'pirka', which means 'beautiful' in the Ainu language, and the view of the stars would no doubt have been quite beautiful if the sky weren't completely covered by clouds when we visited. Even so, we had the pleasure of seeing this enormous machine in motion, whirring around like a Gundam robot, and the observatory's planetarium provided us with a glimpse of what we might have seen in better conditions.



▲ Stoves of generations past

In Japan, it is said that if you look at the moon closely, you can see a rabbit pounding mochi with a mortar. Sadly, this mochi-mashing moon-mammal was obscured on the night we visited, but had the weather been better we may have been in the perfect place to appreciate space-mochi as well as the more terrestrial kind we had enjoyed during the day.

The observatory is open to the public, so if you're in the area on a clear night, I would thoroughly recommend a visit. It's sure to be an out-of-this-world experience.



▲ The Hokkaido University Telescope



▲ Strawberry dai-fuku

Visiting Asahikawa for the Sake of it

'Asahi' may be one of Japan's most recognizable beer brands, but the city of Asahikawa is better known for a beverage that stretches further back into Japan's past: sake – or *nihonshu* (日本酒) as it's known in its native tongue. The clear, mineral-rich meltwaters from the nearby Taisetsu Mountain Range have made the city a popular spot for sake brewing for over a century and continue to lure new generations of artisans seeking to take this traditional drink into the future.

Asahikawa is also home to two further breweries: Takasago (established ten years after Otokoyama in 1909), and Taisetsu (a relatively recent addition that opened as a micro-brewery in 1997). Committed rice-wine enthusiasts can tour all three sites for a comprehensive taste of the region.



▲ Sake tasting

To experience Asahikawa's fabled water at its source, we took a trip into the mountains where we found it gushing forth from a rock-face, waiting to be bottled. This site is popular with locals and tourists alike, and one person had loaded their truck with enough containers to hold several dozen litres. We made do with our 500ml bottles, but the taste was unchanged: smooth, crisp and clean.

Deeper into the mountains we would find these same waters plummeting down from hundreds of metres above at *Hagoromo-no-Taki*, one of the highest waterfalls in Japan. We visited on a somewhat overcast day – rarely ideal for showcasing scenery at its best – but the sight of the majestic falls disappearing into the mists painted a very impressive picture indeed. Feeling like we'd wandered into an enormous *kakejiku* hanging scroll, we stood rooted to the spot, mesmerised by the sheer scale and intensity of the unending torrent. Eventually, we snapped out of this aquatic trance and returned down the brook-side track, letting the waters guide us back to civilisation.



▲ Otokoyama Sake Brewery and Museum

The largest and most famous of the city's breweries is Otokoyama – established in 1899 – whose products have amassed a global following in the 120 years since its inception. The Asahikawa Brewery houses an impressive Sake Museum where you can learn about the history of the drink and enjoy free sake tasting – or pay a small fee to sample some of the brewery's premium beverages.

Higashikawa – Where Streams Meet

Higashikawa is a town of roughly 8000 people lying around 13km to the east of Asahikawa's city centre (the name literally means 'Eastern River'). Much like its city sibling, it is famous for the quality of its water, sitting at the foothills of the Daisetsuzan mountain range from which this aquatic bounty flows. In fact, the highest point in Hokkaido – the summit of Mount Asahi (2,291m) – lies within Higashikawa's administrative borders, and the town is a popular base for hikers, photographers, and nature lovers of all descriptions.



▲ The Rainbow Fountain in Higashikawa

Laying claim to the island's peak isn't the only way that this small town impresses on a large scale: as well as stretching upwards, Higashikawa also has a remarkably global reach. The town has invested hard in international exchange initiatives such as the JET Programme, and is currently home to around twenty participants, with every type (ALT, CIR and SEA) represented. For perspective, this makes up around 7% of all JETs in Hokkaido, which is impressive for a town with less than 0.2% of the island's population. The town also established a Japanese language school in 2015 and hosts over 150 exchange students from more than a dozen countries between this school and the nearby Asahikawa Welfare Professional Training College.

This global influence can be seen (and tasted!) in the town's countless restaurants and cafes, where local

ingredients, nourished by the famous waters, are transformed into an incredible array of international cuisine. Whether you fancy quiche¹ or curry², doughnuts³ or donburi⁴, fresh tofu⁵ or French toast⁶, Higashikawa has you covered, offering a world of flavours within its borders.

Higashikawa also hosts an annual International Photo Competition, showcasing not only the natural splendours of the region, but a breath-taking collection of photography from around the world. The numerous award categories (Overseas, Domestic, New Photographer, Special Photographer, etc.) ensure that a diverse range of works is represented, and the efforts made to showcase and promote this art form have earned Higashikawa the title of 'The Town of Photography'.

In order to learn about what life in Higashikawa as an international resident is like, we caught up with seven (just over half) of the town's CIRs, who all had glowing things to say of their home away from home. Among this group were CIRs from countries with warmer climates such as Thailand, Vietnam, and Myanmar, and while there was initially some concern about Hokkaido's frigid winters, many had learnt to embrace this period by taking up winter sports and similar hobbies. We heard that regular snow ploughing and convenient transport links to nearby Asahikawa (and its airport) make it easy to stay active and avoid cabin fever, even in the depths of winter.

The international atmosphere and kindness of the townspeople were also brought up as highlights, and I came away with the impression that, in spite of the cold, Higashikawa is a town where anyone from any background is sure to be warmly welcomed.

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¹ Noel Delicatessen ² Haru Kitchen ³ &donut ⁴ Ippukuchaya Fuuwa ⁵ Hirata Tofu ⁶ Wednesday cafe&bake

Sweeping to Victory – a Course in Curling

At the time of writing, the diamond dust has begun to settle on the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games, and the Paralympics are in full swing. 2022 also marks the 50th anniversary of the first Winter Olympics to be held in an Asian nation: the Sapporo Winter Olympics of 1972. In the time since, Japan has transformed itself as a Winter Olympic competitor, winning more medals in the last three Winter Games than in all previous events combined. Hokkaido has produced a number of athletes crucial to this success, with no less than eight Hokkaidan Olympians returning from Beijing with medals around their necks. It is no wonder there is an appetite to see the Games brought back to the island for 2030.



▲ Off the blocks

In order to experience the Winter Olympic fever first-hand, we were taken to the Hokkaido Bank Curling Stadium to try our hand at the sport also known as ‘chess on ice’. Much like chess, it requires the player to keep a cool head and analyse not only the current state of play, but also several moves ahead. Unlike chess, these stone-cold calculations are carried out with actual cold stones, which slide smoothly across a surface of slightly bumpy (*‘pebbled’*) ice towards a target (*‘house’*) on the other side of the lane (*‘curling sheet’*). The ice can then be polished to influence the stone’s trajectory after release.

Due to the length of the *sheet* and the relatively slow speed at which the stone moves across it, curling is not a particularly fast-paced game, but what it lacks in velocity,

it makes up for in the anticipatory thrill of watching your stone gradually but gracefully make its way towards the *house*. Until I tried the sport myself, I found it hard to believe that anything so slow could be so intensely exhilarating, but after my first attempt, I was hooked. I found myself glued to the television every time a curling match was live.

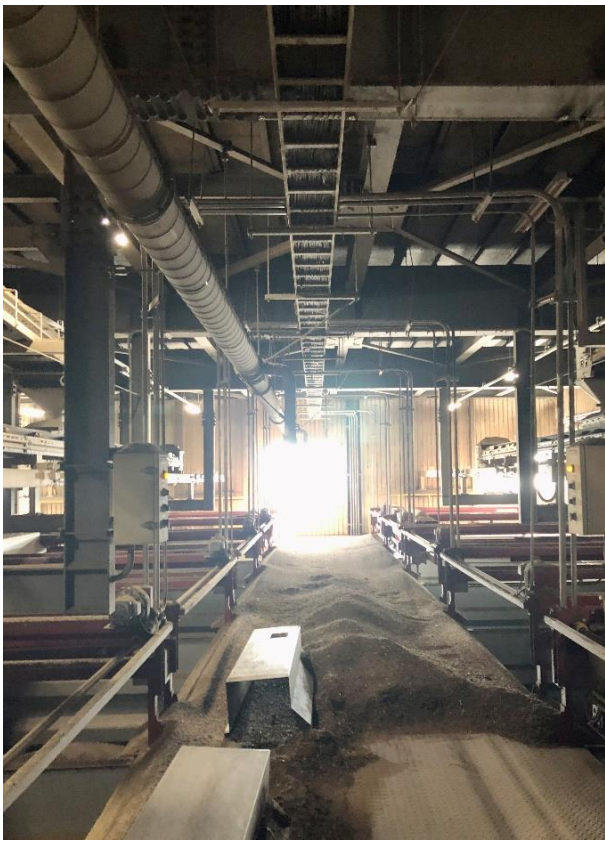
This was especially true for the women’s finals, which saw Great Britain’s team from Scotland play against Japan’s team from Kitami, Hokkaido. Watching these two northern giants knock each other’s rocks off was undoubtedly my personal Winter Olympic highlight, and though the Scottish team eventually won with a clean sweep, it was still a very well-fought match. It seemed somehow fitting for the Scottish team to take curling gold, given that the sport is thought to have originated in Scotland in the early 16th century. It was also the only gold that Team GB won at the 2022 Winter Olympics, and one of only two medals in total – the other being the silver medal that the men’s curling team took the day before.

After we had finished our curling session at the stadium, we headed to the site of another Winter Olympic sport: ski jumping. The Okurayama Ski Jump Stadium sits prominently on the slopes of Mt. Okura, boasting panoramic views of the city of Sapporo. Built in 1931 and renovated in 1970 for the Sapporo Winter Olympics, it continues to be a symbol of the Games, housing various memorabilia from the 1972 games at the Sapporo Olympic Museum.

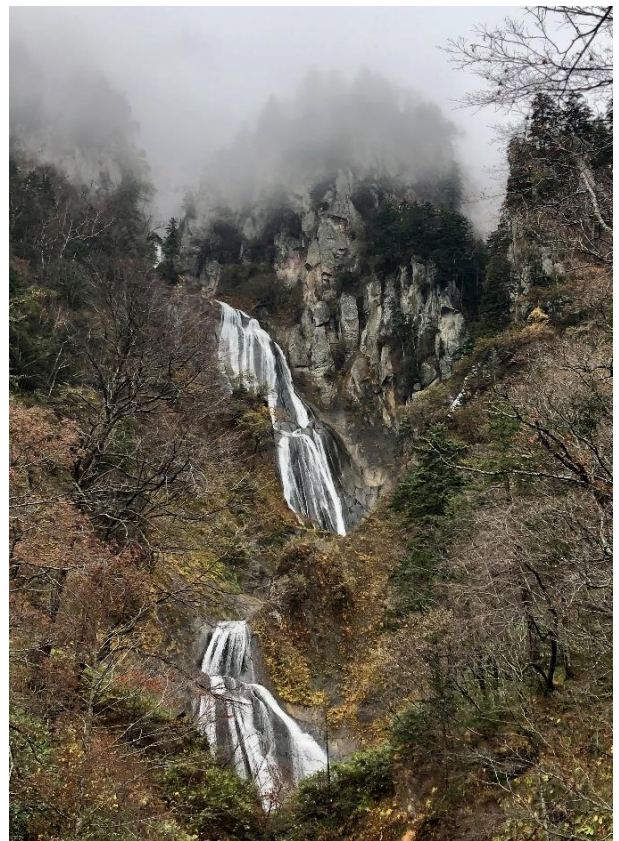
Unlike at the curling stadium, we weren’t allowed to directly try out the facilities at the ski jump stadium. ...Which is probably just as well as I might not be writing this if we were.

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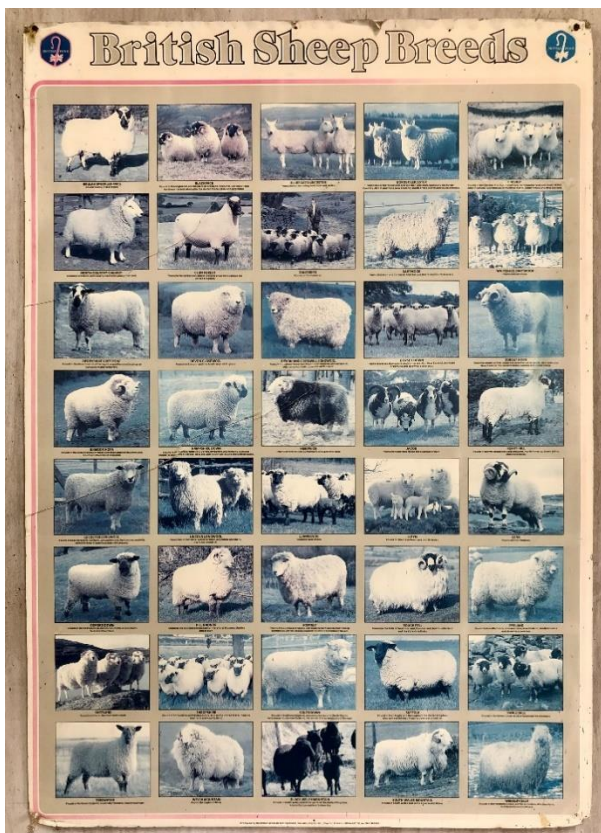
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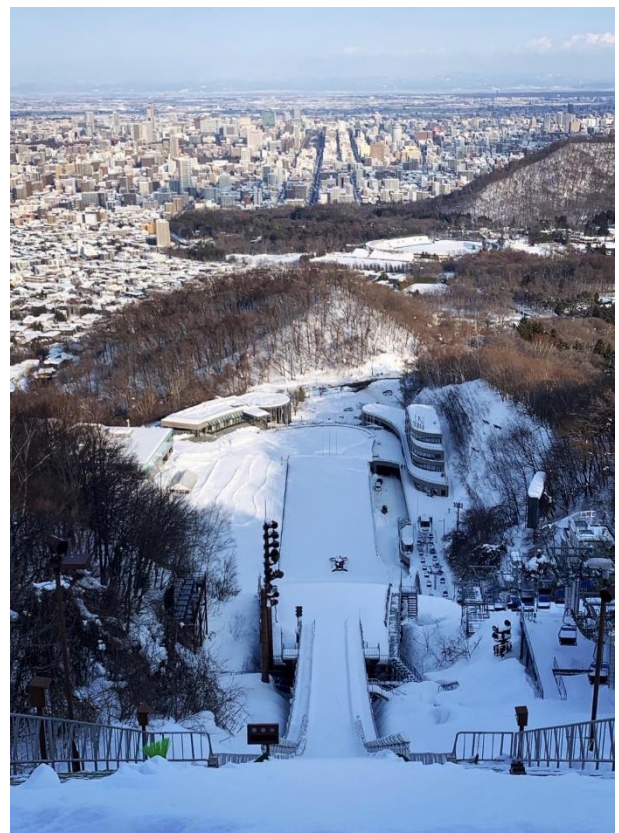
▲ Inside the soba factory



▲ The Hagoromo-no-Taki waterfall



▲ The British sheep breeds poster



▲ Okurayama Ski Jump Stadium

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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 MEGAN BISILA

In this issue, we introduce Megan Bisila, a cat-loving camper and accomplished seamstress. She is a fourth-year JET and first-year CIR based in the city of Iwamizawa.

Tell us a bit about yourself!

Hey there! My name is Megan Bisila and I hail from a teeny-tiny snowy town called Kimball, Minnesota, but I currently live in the not-as-teeny-tiny snowy city of Iwamizawa as a CIR. I spent three years as an ALT in Shiranuka in the east, and transferred to my current placement in the west last summer. I'm a big fan of cats, sewing, camping, ice cream, and reading.

What brought you to Hokkaido/Japan?

It's a tale old as nerds, but I loved anime, manga and reading a lot growing up, which was my first introduction to the island country of Japan, but I first heard about JET from a friend in high school. I studied English, Japanese and Asian Studies in college so something English-y with a Japanese flair was what I thought my future would hold. Then in college, I had the amazing opportunity to visit Obihiro, Hokkaido for a six-week internship at an *eikaiwa* school. It was fantastic, and I fell in love with both the job and the lovely land of Hokkaido, leading me to apply for JET and place Hokkaido at the very top of my requests list! So now here I am!



▲ Megan doing her special pose

How has your experience been so far?

Delicious and green. I feel quite lucky being trapped in Hokkaido during this era of travel restrictions, because there's no shortage of nature or delicious foods to try. I have a car and really enjoy the freedom it brings to drive all over land and creation, trying all the fantastic food and seeing all the amazing places the island has to offer. From the urban nature in central Obihiro, to the eastern sea and mountains of Shiranuka, and now to the western snowy tundra of Iwamizawa, I have yet to be disappointed with Hokkaido. Except for maybe the lack of burritos.

What has been your most memorable moment?

It's truly impossible to pick just one as there are many fun things of equal caliber. Skiing on a mountain for the first time, solo-camping around eastern Hokkaido and adopting camp-dads and grandpas (or maybe they adopted me), ice-cream tours. But the fun "Japanese-y" answer I give is when I participated in Shiranuka's festival, "Kami-para" or "Coming Paradise." I enjoy baking, so along with a Japanese friend with the right connections and a fellow ALT buddy who is rather fond of whiskey, we got to spend the weekend selling Scotch whisky and English earl grey tea with a side of homemade "American" cookies. It was really nice to feel part of the community and meet all the different characters in town.



▲ Iwamizawa Park

What is your favourite thing about your region?

Unfortunately given the state of the world right now and my limited experience of Iwamizawa, I haven't been able to experience many new events. But I do enjoy the rose garden and the lovely short mountain hike to the observatory there that overlooks the city. We also have skiing right in town for the snowy months! Even with the Covid restrictions, I've also got to try my hand at some new experiences like bouldering and pottery! Iwamizawa is also part of the aptly named Sorachi area, which roughly translates to "know the sky," and as you leave the tall city buildings behind it's nothing but wide-open sky and rolling fields of gold. Absolutely breathtaking.

