

Marlaina McElheny (CIR at the Hokkaido Government until July 2021) introduces Hokkaido's *Michi no Eki*-Roadside Stations.

## Michi no Eki: The Stops Along the Way

When you think of summer in Hokkaido, you might think of juicy watermelons or melons. You might think of green, green, green, so much green nature to explore. Or you might think of the open road, stretching out for miles and miles, waiting for you to zoom zoom your way along it. #HokkaidoLove

And if you are an avid driver, or even a 'sometimes driver', you might have noticed signs for "Michi no Eki" as you have been zooming along. Maybe you've even stopped there. But what is a *Michi no Eki*? And why do they seem to be everywhere in Hokkaido?

*Michi no Eki* is usually translated as "roadside station," but as that could mean a lot of things to a lot of people from various countries, let's talk about what it means in Hokkaido. Former JET and *Michi no Eki* enthusiast Catrina Caira was kind enough to provide me with an explanation:

"*Michi no Eki*" literally means "station of the road" or "roadside station." Some of you will start to get a picture in your head just from that description. For the Canadians and Americans among us, you may think of rest areas or welcome centers on major highways, and this is not a bad place to start as many *Michi no Eki* have similar services in their most basic form. All *Michi no Eki* have 24-hour public restrooms and a parking lot that is free to use. This can make them extremely convenient during long distance trips, and they are found all over Japan! *Michi no Eki* will normally have some kind of store or restaurant. These will sell locally produced goods and souvenirs. Whatever the local region is famous for will be on sale at the *Michi no Eki*. There will also be a tourist information place. This is almost always in Japanese only but you can find out what there is to see and do in the local area. There is also a place to rest – either a room with chairs and tables, or a park or picnic area – at most locations. These features make them excellent stopping points on any trip, especially by car.

But why have some *Michi no Eki* become destinations in and of themselves? The short answer is that they are often put in places where there is something to see or do. There are nature sanctuaries, aquariums, museums, national parks, amusement parks, and more

at many *Michi no Eki*. Also, you can collect *Michi no Eki* stamps! Get just five in the official stamp book and you can enter a drawing for a small prize, but the more you go to in one year, the better the prize you might win. Go to them all within two years and you can get a cool certificate and sticker. I love *Michi no Eki* and the stamp rally is a fun challenge."



There are currently 126 Michi no Eki spread out across Hokkaido, from Hakodate to Wakkanai to Kushiro. And as mentioned above, there is a stamp rally held yearly where participants can buy the booklet from any Hokkaido Michi no Eki, and then every time they stop at a Hokkaido Michi no Eki, they just have to find the unique stamp and stamp the corresponding page in the book. To some people, it's a yearly endeavor that helps them get out and explore the island.



Photos feature Michi no Eki: Yotteke! Shimamaki ,  
Minatoma~re Suttsu, Toyoura& Sunflower  
Hokuryu



Japanese and foreigners who live here on the island alike enjoy the *Michi no Eki* and the stamp rally. Here are a few words from current JET Chris Mahmood about his experience with these roadside stations and the roads that connect them.



For me, *Michi no Eki* are the ultimate excuse to get out and explore. This year, I wanted to get out and see more of the island, but Hokkaido is absolutely massive, and trying to painstakingly research areas to check out is daunting. Not only are *Michi no Eki* packed with information about local attractions, a lot of the time they're the best destination of any given town! You can try out the local specialties, get the best *omiyage*, and some even have aquariums or *onsen* tucked inside.

This year, I've been working on the stamp rally, which has also been a great conversation starter around my schools. My teachers are always eagerly recommending various restaurants, tourist attractions, and hidden gems, while the kids love hearing about my adventures. It's also a great way to connect with other ALTs across the island, especially those you haven't seen in a while.

Out of the 40 or so stations I've made it to so far, my favorite has definitely been Onneyu Onsen (温根湯温泉) about 20 minutes outside of Kitami. On top of being a great *onsen* spot, they have a cute little aquarium, a singing cuckoo clock tower, and a fox park where you can watch foxes and *tanuki* laze around.

Roads are clear, summer sun still bathes the island in its shining light, and there is still much to explore. For all you drivers (and riders, I saw both motorcyclists and bicyclists on my last *Michi no Eki* jaunt), *Michi no Eki* provide a way to travel Hokkaido and see things while being able to properly social distance and avoid public transport. So grab your mask, and get out there and go! What can you discover along the way to the *Michi no Eki*?





There are over 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. Read on to learn more!



## Meet Shantell!

“It is your right to choose what you do and what you don’t do, to choose what you believe in and don’t believe in. It is your right to curate your life and your own perspective.” I spent at least twenty-minutes trying to figure out how to introduce myself and I decided to start off with a quote from Lady Gaga, as I feel like it helps summarize a lot of why I came and still live here in Japan. But before getting into all of that, I’m Shantell – a 4th year ALT living in Sarufutsu Village, the most northern village in all of Japan. I am going to be 25 in September this year and this will be my 5th birthday in Japan! I have a bachelor’s in East-Asian Economics and Religious Studies; I have spent a year and a half in Osaka as an exchange student which is what inspired me to come back to Japan!



### What is your favorite thing to eat in Hokkaido?

Oh my goodness, so I like to dub myself a certified foodie here in Hokkaido. I have had so many amazing dishes from around the island. Specifically, planning trips around places that I want to eat at... But the best meal I have had since coming here was one that I had in Sapporo. It was a twelve course meal, with local and imported ingredients from Soya Beef to aged French Charlottes. The menu changes with the season and I find myself circling back to that amazing restaurant at least twice a year. The name of the place is 鉄板ステーキレストラン YANAGI (*Teppan Steak Restaurant YANAGI*), it’s on the expensive side but totally worth it in my opinion!

### What is your favorite thing about summer in Hokkaido?

I feel bad for bringing this back to food but.. it would be BBQs. I generally love being outside, but what’s better than a picnic or a BBQ in Hokkaido’s beautiful summers? I often invite both my ALT friends, JTEs, and other Japanese friends to come over and enjoy some communal digs! I loved throwing a good *dardy* (day-party) in the States and its really nice to be able to bring that culture here too! If I am not throwing a BBQ, I am going on drives or riding my long-board through town. Just being able to get outside is something that I cherish, and since I have no snow sport capabilities I try to be as active in the summer as possible!

## What brought you to Japan?

As I mentioned in my bio, I use to live in Osaka in a town called Hirakata. For half a year, I lived together with a host family and then for the remainder of my time I lived in an international dorm with other exchange students! But before going to Japan as an exchange student, I went with my college on a cultural immersion programme to study both Japanese culture and religion. It was from then that I solidified my love for Japan's culture, specifically for its religion. I am fascinated with shrines and temples and love to learn about Japanese gods and folklore. When I lived in Osaka, I tried to visit as many shrines as I could to look at the beautiful designs and architecture. Sadly, there aren't many shires or temples where I currently live but I do go to some from time to time!

## What is one thing that you wished that you knew before coming to Japan?

Only one? Well, if I had to pick one thing it would be to buy a car that I actually like driving, from the start. Living in Hokkaido, particularly the further north you are, the more important having a car becomes. I got a really cheap car because I 1) listened too much to what others thought was best for me 2) I thought I might give up half way through the five years and getting a car I could pay off in a year would be best. But if you are planning on living in Japan for the whole five years, I think it is best to buckle down and get a car that you like and that is fun to drive.

