

Pandemics IN History



Depiction of a plague doctor from the time of the Black Death

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The world is currently in a pandemic. A pandemic is defined as an epidemic of disease that has spread across a large region, for instance multiple continents, or worldwide. Work and school environments around the world have been drastically affected. Things that seemed impossible to do before—teleworking, online classes, etc.—now are things that are being put suddenly into practice.

Nothing is simple and there are still miles to go. The best thing that we can do as a society is to flatten the curve by practicing social distancing, proper hygiene, and all the other things that governments and scientists around the world are toting.

But while pandemics are thankfully rare, they are not unheard of. This month’s Red Brick Bulletin will take a look at four pandemics that have occurred throughout world history.



The Black Death

(1346-1353)

Death Toll: 75-200 million (est.)

You may have heard of this one. The disease was the Bubonic Plague spread by a bacillus called *Yersinia pestis*, and was thought to have originated in Asia and spread over three continents via the fleas on the rats on the ships that traveled to ports and spread from there. This disease was terrifyingly, indiscriminately contagious—it spread through the air and through bites of infected fleas and rats—and efficient; people who were healthy when they went to bed at night could be dead by morning.

While the plague never really ended, many cities learned from it, and created social distancing and quarantines of sailors. This helped to prevent a repeat of the darker years. Strains of the same bacterium still exist even now, but modern sanitation and public-health practices have greatly mitigated the impact of the disease.



Plague of Justinian

(541-542 CE)

Death Toll: 30-50 million

Thought to be the first recorded instance of the Bubonic Plague. After its initial hit in 542, the sickness recurred again and again over the next 225 years, and devastated the city of Constantinople as well as much of the population of the Eastern Mediterranean, and weakened the Byzantine Empire. Justinian was the name of the Emperor in power when the plague first occurred, and while he did catch it, he also survived it.



Flu Pandemic aka the Spanish Flu

(1918-1920)

Death Toll: 20-50 million

While the flu is something that pops its head up annually, the flu pandemic of 1918 was a bit different. This flu began in the United States in the post-World War I era, and quickly spread around the world. Around 500 million people were reported infected with a mortality rate of 10~20% and in the first 25 weeks alone there were up to 25 million deaths. But what really sets this apart is the victims. While the flu usually is most deadly for children and elderly and others with weakened immune systems, this flu struck down those young adults who were hale and hearty, leaving children and those with weaker immune systems still breathing.



HIV/AIDS Pandemic

(At its peak, 2005-2012)

Death Toll: 36 million

First identified in the 1980s, this is one that we still are dealing with today, but thanks to advances in studies and modern medicine, the death rate, while still high, has decreased for those with HIV/AIDS, and many people infected with HIV are now able to experience a normal life span with regular treatment. While two people were reported in 2020 to have been cured via a stem cell transplant, that treatment is not a general treatment for HIV/AIDSs. As such, there is still a need for further research and more information about this disease before this pandemic can be ended.





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Modern medicines and hygiene practices have made pandemics rarer and less impactful than they have been in the past, but they are still nothing to take lightly, as we are now seeing and experiencing.

One thing to keep in mind, and has been suggested by historians: keep a record of these times. Talk about how the Coronavirus came to be, how it is affecting you, how your government, your country, the world is reacting. Keep a record of your hopes and fears. Not only is writing cathartic, but it will be an interesting thing to leave for those future historians who will look back on this period of history.



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Bottom Line

- Wash your hands
- Practice social distancing
- Stay healthy





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. Read on to learn more!



Meet Carmen!

Hello there!

I'm Carmen A. Kiyoko Lockhart, a second year JET in the Rumoi-kannai. I applied for the JET Programme as I was finishing up my bachelor's degree at the University of British Columbia, with an interest in going on to a program for teaching English at a secondary school level. However, my mother had been encouraging me to look into the JET Programme, and it seemed like the perfect time to take a year off education and get some experience in a classroom, while also learning about part of my heritage, since my maternal side of the family is Japanese-Canadian.

You may have noticed "take a year off", in contrast to "second year JET", meaning things didn't go exactly according to plan, which seems to have been a re-occurring theme during my time on JET.



What brought you to Hokkaido ?

As is the case with most, if not all JETs, it was completely random, and in some ways, I am grateful, though there are some moments when I can't help but wonder what things could have been like. During the application process, I had requested for places that were generally around or within the Kansai area, since my great-grandparents came from Tottori-ken and Wakayama-ken, and I wished for a placement nearby. To my surprise however, I was placed in Hokkaido, in the Rumoi sub-prefecture, which as it turns out, has been alright, but in the complete opposite direction, which usually brings out a chuckle or two in conversations.

How has your experience been so far?

I'm grateful that I've had this opportunity to live in Japan, not to mention living on my own for the first time, which has had its ups and downs.

Summers here are comfortably warm for the most part, and although my first winter was cold and eye-opening (since Vancouver has mild winters), I felt a sense of familiarity because of the resemblance and similarities I've found to BC's Okanagan (minus the extreme wind and proximity to the ocean).

As for my experiences with people, honestly, it's been a mixed bag, which is to be expected; every person is different. There have been people who have gone out of their way to make me feel comfortable and accepted, wanting to share the great and wonderful things about their home and their experiences. There have also been people who have gone out of their way to do the opposite, as there will be in pretty much any part of the world. For the most part though, I have had positive experiences, and have had conversations that started purely out of curiosity, which have led to me learning about a variety of topics, new friendships, as well as many interesting and fantastic experiences.

What has been your most memorable moment?

Any question that asks me to choose my favourite or most _____ of _____, is next to impossible for me! I guess I'll go with the conglomeration of moments that made me stay longer.

The main reason I stayed for a year longer than I had originally intended, was because of the students and the teachers that I work with. As a preface, I was initially told that I would work at two junior high schools, which to be fair, would still be in the range of secondary students back home, which was great. Then, two weeks or so before flying out of Vancouver, my supervisor sent me email that said I would be working at those two junior highs, in addition to five elementary schools. Talk about surprises!

As it turns out, the younger kids are the ones, who for the most part, seem to show more of an interest in learning English. It was the younger students, surprisingly mostly second grade elementary students, that were the ones who most frequently sent letters with questions in the "International Mailbox" that we set up at one of the elementary schools; some of the older students even made an effort to write parts of their letters in English. Seeing that I actually could have an impact on the students' interest in English, and learning in general, definitely impacted the decision of whether or not to stay longer.

With some of the older students, simply being able to help them work through whatever difficulties they were having, helping to lower their stress and boost their confidence in just putting in effort, even if they weren't correct a hundred percent of the time, was more rewarding than anything.

Oh, and also, the first few times I experienced the noon-time horn-alarm-thing were definitely memorable.

What is your favorite thing about your region?

The night sky, the sunsets, the clouds after a thunderstorm, the wide array of food, friendly people, the foxes that dart in and out of sight, the salmon that gather at the mouth of the rivers at the beginning of fall, even the crows that caw in their murders (which as I type this, sounds grim, but is still entertaining none of the less, apologies to whomever translates this), and the silence that covers the fields that become shrouded in thick blankets of snow. Curling up under a warm kotatsu on cold nights, the sunlight gleaming on still lakes, the fresh scent of growing plants on sea breezes, the howling song of the wind that rushes in from the sea... and that perfectly timed "moo" during a serious conversation, from that one particular cow in a far off field.

The fact that all of these, and more, can exist in one region; one region, that even for a short time, I have been able to call home.

