Greetings family, friends, and supporters! Thank you for wanting to share this tremendous experience of going to Japan with me! How did I get to this point? That’s a fantastic question. I will be going to Japan under a Program known as the Japanese Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program. I was introduced to JET as a freshman in college. I came across a representative of this program where I learned that JET hired native English speakers to either teach English in Japan, or to become a sort of cultural ambassador. I kept this information in the back of my mind as I continued on in college because it genuinely interested me.

Once I was getting ready to graduate from my University, I took a chance and applied for the program. By the grace of God, I was accepted into the program and I am but a few days away from being in the country. Going to Japan has always been one of my goals; especially when I decided to major in the language during my college years. Never would I have imagined that it would be happening so soon!

You might be thinking, “Where is she going and what will she do in Japan?” Well, I am happy to announce that I will be headed to the Southern Islands of Japan to Tokunoshima Island as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) of English!
Never heard of Tokunoshima?

About the Island

Tokunoshima (徳之島) is located in the far south of Japan. Though it is not attached to the mainland, it is part of Kagoshima prefecture (鹿児島県) (the horseshoe-like tip of Kyushu (九州) Island). It is part of the Amami (奄美) Archipelago between Kyushu (九州) and Okinawa (沖縄). The island is approximately 95.66 sq. mi. and there is a population of about 27,000 people living on the island!

(ikipedia.org)

Though it may appear small, the community is close-knit! According to a current ALT living in the town of Amagi (天城町), Micah Mizukami said, “The Island is absolutely beautiful and the people are warm and friendly. The communities are tight here on Tokunoshima, [and] if you get to know the locals, they’ll welcome you with open arms and treat you like family.”

So where will I be on the Island?

In addition to having the unique experience of being part of an Island placement, I will be living in the southern part of Tokunoshima Island (徳之島)! More specifically, the town of Isen (伊仙町)! Since the Island is rather small, there are no big cities. Instead, there are three major towns including mine. There is the town of Amagi (天城町) in the northwest and the actual town of Tokunoshima (徳之島町) in the east, and then there are surrounding villages.

I will not be the only ALT on the Island. There will be one ALT in Amagi (天城町), and two others in Tokunoshima (徳之島町). So in total, that makes four native English speakers who are – perhaps, at most – a 1-hour drive away from me. One of the ALTs is also coming from the U.S., one is coming from Canada, and there is a current ALT from England.
About My Job: Being an ALT

What does an ALT do?

The position of the ALT makes up about 90% of all JET participants. ALTs are placed in Japanese schools all the way from Elementary School to High School (sometimes going to the Kindergartens). In my case, I will be teaching at both Elementary Schools and Middle Schools. As an ALT, it will be my job to work with Japanese Teachers of English (JTE) within the classrooms of each school I will work at. Some of my duties will include:

- Assisting foreign language classes in the Middle Schools
- Assisting foreign language activities in the Elementary Schools
- Assisting foreign language training for the teachers
- Preparing foreign language material
- (Depending on Japanese language level) Translating materials from Japanese to English or vice versa
- Participating in extracurricular activities within the schools (i.e. school clubs, activities, etc.)
- Assisting foreign language speech contests
- Participating in international exchange activities
- Other duties that may be given to me by my Contracting Organization (CO)

As you noticed I have been using the word “assist.” I am not the actual teacher of the classroom because I do not hold the proper credentials to be a teacher. Credentials are not necessarily needed for this program, but a Bachelor’s Degree is – as well as being a native or fluent speaker of English.

Japanese language ability is also not necessary for this position, but it does help with communicating with your Supervisor, JTEs, and the local people in the area you would live in. I do have Japanese language experience and because of that, it may mean extra duties may be allotted to me, but one can only assume what may happen. A phrase the JET Program has fully embraced is, “Every Situation Is Different (ESID).” I will not know my duties fully until I arrive. Until then, I can only prepare for what I may think will come.
Thank you everyone who took the time to read my first newsletter about my JET Program Experience! It took a while to figure out how I wanted this to be formatted (and to get it properly formatted) and to figure out what information I would like to share with you. I will come out with the next issue in the next 1-2 months depending on how much free time I have to write one up. I hope to keep you all posted as consistently as I can because I would love to share with you as much as I can.

Please do not repost this newsletter in any other form (e.g. newspapers, online, social media etc.) without my permission. This version was made specifically for the ASAM department at California State University, Fullerton. Thank you and I will see you in the next issue!

- With much love and thanks,

Michelle Garcia
By: Michelle Garcia

Well, everyone, I have successfully lived one full month in Japan and I must say it has been quite the adventure here so far. As you know from the last newsletter, I departed for Japan on July 23, 2016. I arrived safely on July 24th in Tokyo, Japan. When I stepped foot out of the plane I was in disbelief that I was actually in Japan since the thought of even coming here was only just a thought – but there I was staring at more Japanese people than I have ever seen outside of a place like Los Angeles.

The group I arrived with was all from Southern California (others from the US to come on another plane) and we were about to meet our fellow English speakers from all over the world (Note: really it’s just the US, Australia, Ireland, Jamaica, and South Africa because our arrival orientations were split into 3 initial sessions. The session after us, Session B, included more people from the US, England, Canada, Singapore, and a few others; and Session C included alternates or more people from other countries). Thus, we were herded like cattle through the airport, past immigration and on our way to the “magical” Tokyo Orientation.
Tokyo Orientation

What is Tokyo Orientation?

Tokyo Orientation is an information session that all JET Participants will go to as soon as they arrive in Japan (if they were part of the three sessions mentioned earlier). Speaking for my own session, it lasted around 2.5 days from 8AM until 5PM for two days and then 8AM to 11AM the next day because then you were sent off to your new home. This orientation consisted of information sessions about living and working in Japan (e.g., things to keep in mind, watch out for, make sure you take care of etc.). It also included crash course workshops about how to be an ALT (It was kind of useful, kind of not – ESID: Every Situation Is Different). Lastly, we covered disaster information because for those of you who don’t know, Japan is very prone to natural disasters! That means earthquakes, typhoons, possible tsunamis and the like.

Aside from being in information sessions all day, we were lucky enough to have free time in the evening to explore a little. Our orientation was held at the Keio Plaza Hotel in Shinjuku, Tokyo! For someone who is not used to such a large area with many people, I felt like I was in Vegas and was slightly overwhelmed. Yet, I would consider myself blessed because I did not leave for Japan alone. I had 3 Cal State Fullerton Alumni (Titans) who were accepted to JET with me and they were my family away from home (two friends which I spent most of my time with on our free time, and one out of the two in which we spent two hours getting lost in the train station just to get to Waseda University for salsa dancing! 
My Arrival in Tokunoshima (徳之島)

The Move

Leaving the orientation was hard for me because it felt like I was leaving my family at the airport again. I can’t lie and say that I didn’t cry when I left my parents and brother at the airport, and my heart was just as heavy when I left my Titan family because this time, we would be miles apart - even a couple of plane rides apart on my end. I was truly on my own at this point.

I departed Tokyo to Kagoshima Prefecture (my home prefecture) and was met by one of my BoE members. Together, we left right away on the next plane to Tokunoshima. The second plane ride wasn’t so long – only about an hour. I thought that Kagoshima was hot and humid, but I was not expecting the heat and humidity from the island! I was met at the airport by my Predecessor, Jonathan, another BoE member, and my Kachō (課長 – section manager). After a brief greeting with my Kachō, I was taken to the BoE itself. Just because the schools on the island were on summer vacation did not mean that we were too. I went to work that same day and said my self-introduction a million times thereafter.

Now I mentioned work but since the schools are on vacation, what work am I talking about? There are no kids around to teach! I mean office days. This means that for the entire month of August, I have been sitting on my booty trying to keep myself busy. Basically, I looked up teaching materials, created game activities, read books, Wikipedia, you name it (no social media). You can only keep yourself “busy” for so long and luckily everyone in the office knew that (though the pressure was real when they asked me what I would do for the day at the morning meetings). If I wasn’t doing the things mentioned above, I was actually taken around to set up important utilities and complete paperwork for living in Japan.
In addition to arriving on the island and starting work as soon as I got off the plane, I was not allowed to stay in my apartment right away because it was still being prepared. So, it was decided for me that I would be doing a homestay with a lady who works at our local town hall (役場 yakuba). I am so thankful that I was given the chance to do this because not only did I find a good friend in this lady, but her family is wonderful and I was finally able to experience what a homestay feels like! Also, I was able to get out into the community because of her. I went to a school beach trip that was run by the PTA; I helped set up our local summer festival; I also was invited to my first Enkai (宴会 is a banquet that is usually all you can eat and drink). My Predecessor also aided in getting me out into the community during this time. I am now currently involved in Eisa and Taiko (Drum dances; I would suggest looking them up on YouTube).

My Predecessor left Japan about a little less than a week from when I arrived and it was time to strap on my adult pants in a foreign country. I still felt very ill prepared, but I knew that as long as I could communicate with my BoE, I would be okay – and I am because clearly, I am still here!! I have successfully done laundry, bought groceries, paid my car payment, and took care of banking business all on my own so far. I would say that adulting is coming along as well as adulting goes.

So far, my experiences here on the island have been nothing but good ones, but challenges are creeping up from around the corner so it is time to brace myself for what is to come. As long as I have God by my side, I know that I will be fine, though. That’s honestly how I got through this whole month. I miss my family, friends, and the US dearly but I know that I am not alone because His presence is with me wherever I go!

Before I end this section I will say that the bugs here are no joke! I have been bitten more times than I can count. Having exotic blood is no fun – just saying. That’s the only negative.
Summer vacation!

What is summer vacation like out here? Well, I cannot answer that question one-hundred percent since I have been in the office most of the time, but I would like to share with you a few more photos about some of the things I have done on the island when I had the time to spare. My welcome party to Tokunoshima was a trip around the whole island with some of my BoE members with a delicious Tokunoshima meal (can be seen on P. 4)! I went to the beach on my own and I even had the chance to meet and hang out with the other ALTs here on the island. Though Tokunoshima does not have any big shopping centers, a movie theater, and huge restaurants, there is still enough here to have a great time and meet wonderful people. All in all, summer vacation is great – just really hot and humid!
Kagoshima Orientation and KAPIC

Kagoshima Orientation

So every JET participant that is new will have one more orientation after Tokyo Orientation. This session is exclusive to your Prefecture (mine being Kagoshima) where you will cover information that is specific to where you live. Honestly speaking, the other Island JETs and I agree that we should have our own orientation separate since we will hardly ever be on the mainland of Kagoshima. However, I will say it was a great opportunity to get to know the other JETs in my Prefecture and make some lasting friendships – it also helps if I ever do decide to venture out there.

KAPIC Center

I would prefer to focus on the KAPIC center where we spent more of our orientation and made the orientation worthwhile. KAPIC is an acronym for Kagoshima Asia-Pacific Intercultural Countryside Center. It was here that we JETs could bond by learning Japanese together, participating in traditional Japanese culture (i.e. kimono wearing, Ikebana etc.) and also visit their Asian History Museum! To be honest, I loved everything about this place and it is hard to choose one thing I liked the most, but if I had to, it would have been the Asian Pacific Intercultural Village Folk Museum. I felt like the inner scholar in me was jumping for joy! The staff here was super awesome and they shared with us their knowledge about other Asian cultures of the world!
Thank you to all who took the time to read this incredibly long newsletter of mine. I apologize for being late on posting it and I probably will be behind here and there in the future. This newsletter could have been longer if I went into great detail and showed you every single photo I have taken since being here, but I needed to compress a lot of information. Your prayers and well wishes are still appreciated and welcomed! For those of you who are believers in Jesus Christ, then my prayer request is to find a sound church out here and find a community of believers to be part of. Also, shout out to my parents who sent me my first care package! I was missing out on cooking ingredients I cannot buy here on the island and toothpaste that has fluoride in it. If you want to send me anything, please let me know!

Before I wrap it up, if there is something I mentioned in this newsletter that you have a particular interest in and would like to know more, please let me know! I would be more than happy to share with you! You can find my e-mail address on the first newsletter I sent out. Thanks again for your continued support while I am out here. I miss everyone dearly but I look forward to sharing my experiences here with all of you. I start working in the classes this Monday the 5th! Here I go!

**Please do not repost this newsletter in any other form (e.g. newspapers, online, social media etc.) without my permission. This version was made specifically for the ASAM department at California State University, Fullerton.
Hello, everyone! The last you heard from me was back in early September for my August newsletter. I really wanted to keep you posted on a monthly basis but realistically speaking, that will not happen. My life has been so busy I actually did not realize that both September and October had sped by and that we are already entering November! I do not want to leave you in the dark for over two months, so I have grouped September and October in the same issue!

So much has happened these past few months from starting my new job, becoming the new local celebrity, and to trying to maintain a normal and healthy lifestyle. I wish I could share every detail in this newsletter but I do not think you are ready to read a miniature book! So without further ado, enjoy!
Becoming the new ALT meant that I was inheriting everything that my Predecessor was leaving behind. As far as my job is concerned, that means I inherited roughly 2,000 students to teach and 11 schools to teach at (8 ES and 4 JHS). Before I could let any of that overwhelm me, I decided to start at square 1: figuring out how to get to my schools. I tried to find my way on my own, but I got lost a few times so, instead, I was shown around by my Kachō.

Once I memorized how to get to my schools, it was time to meet some of my Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs). I have 4 in total and they only work at my Junior High Schools.

So, why meet with the Junior High JTEs only? The answer to that would be that kids do not seriously start to learn English until Junior High School. Recently, it has been implemented that 5th and 6th graders will start to learn English too, but it is more from a basic conversational level (honestly, you can’t even call it a conversational level). It is more like learning vocabulary and how to introduce yourself (name and what you like only).

Anyways, I thought it was a good thing to meet with my JTEs beforehand because I was able to ask them about their expectations of me, and in return, share my expectations with them. Luckily, we were all on the same page, but somehow I created a rift in my teaching schedule by doing this!
What did I do to create a rift in my schedule? Literally, all I did was ask my teachers to send me their schedules one week in advance so that I will have time to prepare for class – because, you know, I have 11 schools to teach at over here. My supervisor heard that and kind of wigged out, but it meant that I get one day out of the week to sit in the office and prepare for class. It also means that one week is entirely devoted to my Elementary Schools and the other to my Junior High Schools – I am okay with that! How effective is this change from my Predecessor’s schedule? If you ask me, I would say about 60% effective. If you ask my Pred, he would probably say 70-80%.

Despite the sudden change, I was finally able to meet my students and I must say that I have some of the best, most energetic, and perhaps troublesome students of all. Though I have students who cause me trouble and stress, I still care about them. I can only hope that they develop even the smallest of interests in learning English. What makes my job worthwhile – despite the stress, craziness, and lack of communication from some teachers – is always my kids. They make my day both inside the class and outside the class.

Lastly, becoming the new ALT also meant that I have inherited an Eikaiwa (英会話). Eikaiwa literally just means English conversation, but it refers to a program where people who would like to learn English can come after work to practice their conversational skills. An Eikaiwa is usually tailored for adults who work all day but would still like to study in the evening. My Eikaiwa is full of older ladies and gentlemen – with the exception of one of my JHS students and a young lady around my age. We have had two meetings so far, but the community is good, and the energy is positive! I look forward to working with this group of people. The Eikaiwa is completely voluntary, but I think it is worth it. We meet only twice a month so at least I will not be super drained from school – plus an English class every week!
Every year Japanese schools hold an event called Undōkai (運動会) – Sports Day. This is an event where the kids will practice for a few weeks just to prepare to compete against one another. It is not just an event that the kids get involved in; the teachers, staff, and even the family become involved in this! It is amazing to see how the families become so competitive for their kids’ teams. As you can see from the photos, I also became involved (though I was not prepared to – hence the clothes haha). I was asked many times if American schools have an event like this and as far as my education was concerned, we had nothing quite like this. We did have physical fitness day every week in PE, but it never amounted to this. The school is decked out with many tents, booths, and is full of pride as the kids fashion off Japan’s colors and school colors as well!

Sports Day is popular throughout Japan, but what I think makes this event extra special in Tokunoshima is that the kids and the people are so into sports, it is not even funny. Our (now former) mayor is an 81-year-old man who can still do a triathlon as if he was 30! People here seem to be bred for sports; especially in one particular village – Omonawa village. The kids there are like beasts! Even at our town sports day (all regions in Isen compete) the people who came from that area literally owned everyone else (with the exception of a few others).
Michelle: The local celebrity

Living on such a small island as a foreigner means that you become the local celebrity very fast. I can say that a high percentage of people who live within the borders of my town (maybe even the island) either know who I am or have heard about me in some way; and a majority of that population are people I do not even know!

Being the local celebrity is not such a bad thing. It has its perks. For example, my kids know who I am and immediately come up to me and introduce their families. I think this is a great way for me to connect with the parents and try and assure them that I have their children’s best interests at heart in the classroom. It also means that people want to get to know you and where you are from. Sometimes, the locals will surprise me with random gifts because they remembered that I had said that I liked something the last time we chatted.

A downside is that because it is such a small island and the communities are tight-knit, I need to watch out for what I do and what I say because someone is always watching and listening. If I mess up, that can cause some issues. Thankfully, that has not happened, yet!
After being here for three months, I have experienced my first wave of homesickness. Some people may think they would never go through that, but it is something you cannot predict. I miss my family and friends dearly.

I have lived on my own before, but this is my first time being truly on my own. I do not have any family close by that I can just visit and I am still trying to make solid friends. Just because there are other English speakers on this island does not mean that we automatically become buddies.

The way I have found to deal with this is to continue to keep in as much contact with my family and friends as possible. I also had to redraw my boundaries when I need “Michelle time” and time to go out and be social. In addition to learning my boundaries here in Japan, the need for my spiritual wellbeing rang loud.

I am happy to announce that I have found a church here on Tokunoshima that I can attend on Sundays. The church is small with only 10 people, but I will continue to trust God with my life and where He leads me to be. No one said the life of a Christian was easy – not even Jesus said that. I am not perfect and I recognize that I never will be, but one thing for sure is that I know God has never given up on me and I will not give up on my relationship with Him either!
Other things

Part of my job means sharing about your own culture. Coming from a Latino background, I wanted to share something extra special with my coworkers and that would be the Piñata. We were talking about birthdays and I saw my opportunity to tell them about what the piñata is. They liked the idea so much they wanted to have it at my supervisor’s birthday party. One of my coworkers likes to be crafty so I told her how to make one and she ended up making two! It was fun to see everyone participate in breaking open the piñatas! Although, I think my supervisor would have loved it more if money was involved haha!!

Many of you are aware of my love for Salsa and Bachata dancing. Well, Tokunoshima had its very first Salsa lesson on the island – ever – in September. No, I was not the teacher. I would not consider myself good enough to teach Salsa. The teacher that came to the island is originally from Cuba, yet teaches New York style Salsa. He is currently living in Tokyo, Japan with his wife – who is Japanese – and who is also his dance partner.

What brought them to our island? I was happy to hear that his wife is actually a native to my area. She was not out here to just visit her family; she was here to share her passion for dance with the others who live here. It was great to put my dance shoes back on since I was in Tokyo. Unfortunately, that may be the last time I wear my shoes for a while.
Well, there you have it, folks! I have combined two months’ worth of events into one newsletter! I apologize for being late. Honestly, my life has been hectic. I thought that only the first month would be crazy, but I guess it will take a little while longer until I have found my groove here. To be quite frank, I always wonder what if I was placed somewhere else instead of Tokunoshima, but in the end, I am happy that I was placed here. Why? Because I realize that this is truthfully the once in a lifetime experience that people talk about. If I was placed in an area I actually requested to go, I would never have gotten to know the wonderful community here and my amazing students. I cannot express enough how much I care about them and I have only known them for 2 months.

So when can you expect the next newsletter? That is a grand question! I would say to expect the next letter in two months and to be a little late just like this one haha! Sorry! I will also do my best to post pictures to keep you all in the loop of how things are going. Sometimes I forget to take photos, so I need to step up my game. Thank you for your support, love, prayers, and good thoughts! As a reminder, please ask for my permission to share my newsletters as it is exclusive to those I want to share it with. If there is a particular topic you are interested in, please send me your requests. Either I will include it in my next letter, or I will share the information via Facebook, e-mail, or whatever form of communication I have with you!

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Many thanks and much love,

Michelle Garcia
Hello again, everyone! It’s nice to be back with another newsletter! I don’t think I will ever stop restating how fast the months have been passing. November and December have been pretty busy and are very much a blur. Thankfully, I am now on “Winter Beak” and can take a breather. Why use quotation marks? For those of you who are teachers, you may understand this (maybe not) but just because the students are now free from school and classes, does not mean that I am too. I have office days again – yay! I have a permanent smile on my face as I greet people happily when they come to the BOE. Just kidding! Actually, I look more like the photo off to the side. I have no work to do right now, so once again, I am trying to keep myself busy as I wait for my one week vacation (really it’s only five days if you don’t include the weekends). Trying to keep busy isn’t so hard, though, because I will be taking vacation time to travel around Kyushu! So, most of my time is figuring out travel plans, budgeting, and setting up a fun schedule for myself and a friend. This topic, however, will be shared in a separate newsletter of its own. For now, let’s see what’s been going on these past two glorious months!
In my August Newsletter, I talked about Tokyo Orientation and KAPIC. Tokyo Orientation is a crash course for all new JETs, and KAPIC was a bonding camp for the new Kagoshima JETs. What makes SDC different from these two is that it is for all Kagoshima JETs – both new and re-contracted – and our JTEs too. SDC is a conference that is held yearly. The purpose of this conference is to bring together the ALTs with their JTEs to build and develop our teaching strategies by learning from one another. We have one outside guest speaker and the rest are panels held and facilitated by ALTs with their JTEs.

This year’s guest speaker was Dr. Toshinobu Nagamine who is an Associate Professor of English Teacher Education at Kumamoto University. His academic foci include TESOL and Applied Linguistics. I, as well as a small handful of others, was very intrigued by his presentation because (perhaps I am mostly speaking for myself) his panel is quite related to my academic interests. Particularly, this was a great panel because I learned many new things from this Professor and it gave me some new insight for different approaches to use in my classrooms. Though his panel was the highlight of this conference for me, the other panels did not disappoint me either.

Our presenters have shared past lesson plans and activities they have used before and I must say that they are quite useful. They can be altered, improved, or whatever else you need out of it to fit your classes. I have already tried a few of them and I have seen some positive results. As an ALT, I find that keeping things fresh in the classroom is becoming very hard, but one thing I have learned from my friends and colleagues is that you just need to know how to recycle an idea or an activity and make it new.

I must apologize that I do not have any photos of the conference. However, I do have plenty of photos of my adventures outside of the conference. I guess I found that more interesting to take pictures of. What made this whole business trip exciting was that I was finally able to meet my South Island Block family in person. We group message each other all the time, but it’s always nice to finally interact with them in person. We rented out a whole restaurant (super tiny, so nothing too grand) for all you can eat Mexican food and all you can drink. As a Latina, my taste buds were a bit skeptic since I know what real Mexican food is like, but regardless, it tasted so good I was so happy it was all you can eat!

Aside from spending a night out with the South Island Block, I took a day trip to Fukuoka with another ALT friend and was able to see a pretty impressive shopping mall and Fukuoka Tower. Since you took the time to read this extremely long section, please enjoy the next page of photos!
Some people believe that if a couple fastens a heart shaped lock on the fence at Lover's Sanctuary, their love will last forever.
English Speech Contest and Tokunoshima Cultural Exhibit

During the month of November, my Junior High Schools had an English Speech Contest. All three schools with two people from each grade competed against one another. I was asked to be a judge along with other JTEs from the two High Schools on this island.

I remember listening to my students present for the first time and seeing how much work needed to be done. The most I could do to help these students was meet with them for an hour after work once and make a video recording of myself presenting their example speeches for them to model. Though I felt that my gestures were small, I was to be amazed.

I heard each student present and I was so moved by each and every one of them. I could tell that they had practiced very hard on their speeches, and their expressions and pronunciations improved greatly! One student, in particular, blew me out of the water. She was one of maybe 3 or 4 students that needed the most improvement, but at the contest, I nearly cried! It was as if the light in the room shown behind her or something because her pronunciation was amazing! I have never felt so proud! I felt like a mom and she’s not even my kid! Unfortunately, she only won second place for her division – should’ve been first, in my opinion. I left that contest feeling like a proud mom, but more importantly as their ALT. All of the students did amazing!

Aside from the speech contest, all schools and local citizens of Isen put together a cultural exhibit. Kids displayed their calligraphy, arts and crafts, and people displayed their handmade works. There were speeches and performances from the kids and locals alike. In addition, some people’s photos were being displayed because, apparently, it’s a big deal if you’re turning 100 – why wouldn’t it be, right? One of those people is actually a sweet elderly woman from my church! Happy 100th!
I wish I could say that so much has happened this month, but honestly speaking, not much has happened... yet. What has occurred, though, is planning a lesson for what Christmas is like in the U.S.!! That sounds like fun but it is more stressful because I was trying to make a lesson that is understandable for ES and JHS kids. Eventually, I succeeded with the use of flashcards, PowerPoint, a school Newsletter for the JHS kids, and a Christmas card activity.

Understanding a few things about the Japanese school systems and government, I had to be careful on how I presented some information, but thankfully I was able to share that Christmas is a holiday to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ and that is my family’s main reason for celebrating. I did need to add in that not all people celebrate for that reason, so I decided to talk about food too because I feel that was important. As an American, I know well how diverse the U.S. is and not everyone eats Turkey, Chicken, and cake for Christmas. Since there are people from many cultures living in the U.S. we like to incorporate some traditional foods. Some of us eat tamales, sushi, spring rolls, and much more!

Lastly, I think my favorite part of the lesson was the Christmas card activity I prepared for my JHS students. They had to draw a Christmas related picture I described on top of their heads without looking. Whoever won, got to draw a challenge from my fun bag and chose either me or my JTEs to perform that challenge. Needless to say, it was embarrassing and fun for everyone!

My church, as well as a few others, had a joint Christmas party and the kids from another church put on a nice musical performance!

Christmas performances were put on for a home facility for special needs people. My Taiko group and I performed here! No photos, sorry ☹️ This is Isen’s Eisa group (Okinawan drum dance!)

One of my 1st grade JHS classes doing the Christmas card activity!
忘年会（Bōnen kai）– End of the Year Party

So what is this end of the year party all about? I remember a Professor once telling my class about this part of Japanese culture. You see, the first character you see above means “forget,” the second means “year,” and the third means “meeting.” So, if you smash these all together you get forget-year-meeting. This is literally a big part of what this party is. Companies, school (staff only) – your job, basically – will have an end of the year party where it’s usually held at a really fancy hotel or restaurant; it’s usually all you can eat and drink; and it costs quite a bit of money to go. These parties are no joke, though. Your job usually spends quite a bit of time and money planning fun activities, prizes, and the “good stuff” for these parties. Now, I mentioned money. You have to pay to go to this party and if you are lower in status, you usually pay the most money to go. It sucks, but that’s just kind of how it goes.

In my case, my end of the year party was fantastic, but it was nothing really fancy. I ended up paying around $15-20 USD (¥2,000) to go to mine. We played mini golf (I ranked 7th place and won ¥1,000); we went to a karaoke bar and played bingo (I won carpet that was apparently heated – but I didn’t know – and ended up trading it for a DVD player); then we finished off the night at a Karaoke place last. Since Isen town doesn’t have any real fancy places, this is what we got, but that didn’t matter. What made it fun is that I have some really crazy and amazing coworkers inside and outside the office. This kind of party usually includes all this fun stuff, but to tie it back to the main point of forget-year-meeting, there is drinking, lots of drinking! I am not one to go crazy with alcohol so one was enough for me, but the Japanese are huge on drinking culture. People will drink a lot during this party to forget all the bad stuff that happened both inside and outside of work and hope to start the New Year fresh.
Well, there you have it, folks. That's a pretty big snippet from how my life has been going these past two months – of course, besides the everyday life stuff. I don’t think you would be too interested in my daily routines haha! If you have been consistently reading my newsletters, you all have my thanks! I enjoy writing these and sharing with others about my experiences here in Japan. Particularly, I enjoy sharing a non-Tokyo experience. I feel that because the Tokyo life is everyone’s dream and viewpoint of Japan they tend to overlook places like Tokunoshima. Life isn’t easy on an island when you weren’t born and raised in this kind of lifestyle, but I said it before and I will say it again, I am glad I was placed here. The kids make it all worthwhile for me.

I will be traveling around Kyushu for about a week and a half starting tomorrow the 22nd so that is why I wrote this earlier than I would have. I will not be back until New Year’s Eve, so I wanted to make sure this was up. I hope to make a special snippet about that when I return! If not, my personal friends and family will definitely be seeing it on social media. Anyways, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to you all! Thank you for your prayers, good thoughts, love and support! See you in the next issue!

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Hello again, everyone! It has been a while, hasn’t it? I do apologize for my tardiness in coming out with my bimonthly newsletter but I have gotten sick twice in the last couple of months, and each time, a pile of work has hit me as soon as I got better. So I am including 3 months’ worth of my happenings in this newsletter. Here is what you can expect to read:

❖ Michelle’s Winter Special: At the very end of December I went on an adventure with my friend, Jennifer, around Kyushu Island!
❖ January
   o The New Year in Tokunoshima/New Year’s Greetings: I arrived back in Tokunoshima on New Year’s Eve just in time for all the celebrations.
❖ February
   o Valentine’s Day in Japan: What is Single Awareness Day?
   o My Sakura Adventure: After being sick for nearly two months I went on an adventure to find the last Sakura trees still in bloom on the island.
❖ March
   o White Day: What is it?
   o Ending the School Year & Saying Goodbye: March is the last month of the academic school year. I had to say goodbye to many wonderful students and teachers I worked with, but goodbye does not mark the end of our journeys.
Michelle’s Winter Special
First stop: Naha (那覇), Okinawa (沖縄)

My winter adventure ran from December 22nd to December 31st, 2016. I traveled with my ALT friend, Jennifer, who lives on Okinoerabu Island (沖永良部島). We met up on a 10-hour ferry to Okinawa (8 hours for her). It was a fabulous reunion of joyous cheers and hugging when we met on the ferry. I have no doubt we scared some passengers with our enthusiastic friendship. It was around eight at night when we arrived in Okinawa and the first thing on our mind was food. We found a lovely steak restaurant that is apparently US Airforce approved. The steak was small and there were not enough veggies or fries on the plate, but it was certainly worth the money because it was delicious! We spent only one full day on the island hiking on foot around Naha, shopping for quality things we do not have access to on our islands. The highlight of my time in Okinawa was visiting my very first Cat Café! I am a lover of meowing furry babies. So, for one hour, I was in heaven, surrounded by some very cute furry babies. Of course, they cannot amount to my cute Chubby (my actual cat back home in the States). After our full day in Naha, we prepared to leave for our next destination, Fukuoka. However, we checked out of our hotel at ten in the morning with a flight at four in the late afternoon. This is when we realized traveling for the rest of the week was going to be our real adventure. We hauled our suitcases around town, refusing to catch an expensive taxi, asking for directions to the airport and still managing to get lost.

Second stop: Fukuoka (福岡県)

The day we flew out and arrived in Fukuoka it was December 24th, Christmas Eve. The weather shocked us into thinking it was so since the islands, even Okinawa, were still very warm compared to Fukuoka. Our main reason for traveling together was because neither of us had the financial means to return home for Christmas, and did not want to be alone. So that night, we found a lovely hole-in-the-wall Italian restaurant that served the best shrimp tomato cream pasta I have had to date! The next day, Christmas Day, we braved the subways to go to Canal City Hakata to see the illuminations at the train station and the local mall. We were not disappointed in any way. I was lucky enough to get a little sightseeing done at the Fukuoka castle ruins during our four-day stay, but I foresaw that majority of our time was going to consist of lots of shopping, and I was not wrong – we shopped a lot. While we were out, I noticed something I had only seen in YouTube videos but never experienced until now. In Japan, if you travel with an Asian friend (yourself not being Asian), Japanese people tend to ignore you. Even if you speak Japanese well enough, they talk to your Asian friend as if you are ignorant or non-existent. I saw this as the passive aggressive nature I knew existed in Japan but I was still so shocked when it happened. There were moments when Jen and I would shop separately. That is when people warmed up to me more because she was not with me. However, if it was not being ignored by someone it was the overly used, “Wow! Your Japanese is so good. Why?” This continued throughout our trip. It was pretty exhausting. It just opened up my eyes that no matter where you go, no place is perfect. I thought my image of Japan was not sugar coated, but I guess it was. It is a wonderful place but it is not a magical land of rainbow fields.
Off to Kumamoto (熊本県)

After our four-day stay in Fukuoka – filled with lots of shopping, illumination shows, and even seeing our first movie at a theater in Japan – we caught a four-hour bus ride to Kumamoto prefecture where our hotel would be right in front of the castle. (This was definitely the highlight of my whole trip and I vowed to return again.) Since I was a Japanese major back in college, all the historical sights excited me. I was looking forward to seeing the castle, and from afar, it was a glorious sight but we quickly found out the castle was closed because of an earthquake that happened earlier that year; it had destroyed part of the castle. I was pretty bummed out, but that will not stop me from trying to see a castle up close and personal in the future! Luckily, there were some statues of historical figures surrounding the castle, so my sightseeing itch was scratched but not fully satisfied.

On our second day, we braved taking a train a distance away from our hotel to the very north of Kumamoto to go to a theme park called Greenland. In my mind, I did not know what to expect since I have only had experience with American theme parks. The park was no 6 Flags but it was definitely worth our money and we had a blast. One particular memory we made (and Jen will never let me live it down), is that the day was already freezing cold, and my oblivious self, led us into a walk-through fun house of Arctic World; which, was basically a trip into an even colder freezer and back again. When I think about it now, I cannot help but laugh just as hard as when we got out. This is Michelle for you, folks.

Kagoshima (鹿児島県) bound

After our two and a half day adventure in Kumamoto, we took another bus down to our home prefecture. We have already been to Kagoshima a couple of times and I really had hoped to do more adventuring, but with only one day in the city, that did not exactly happen. We did manage to go the Kagoshima Aquarium where I bought a cute little otter puppet, which is my English teaching buddy for Elementary School kids – Lyla the otter is a hit, by the way!

We had been away from our island homes for a little over a week and were feeling the exhaust from being out of the comfort of our own homes. Though we managed to get more last minute shopping done, we wanted to take it slow in the city. I managed to keep up my nerdy tourist act when we saw a statue of Ryōma Sakamoto (坂本龍馬) on one of our walks about the city (He is a famous Samurai from the Satsuma domain). Once again, I was satisfied to have my itch scratched.

While we ate dinner at an all you can eat yaki niku (焼肉) place I realized that we definitely had quite the experience. Jen and I learned more about each other as friends and I can say that my appreciation for her grew. The ocean may separate our islands, but we will always be island sisters. When we said our goodbyes at the hotel before our flights home on New Year’s Eve, I was sad to say goodbye but happy to return home to Tokunoshima. It made me realize just how much I have come to love living here. This island is peaceful and not bombarded with the stresses of having to be somewhere, doing something all the time. Honestly, it has a charm that cannot be put into words. It can only be experienced. Thus, we were off to welcome the New Year in our lovely warm islands.
I returned back to the island early in the morning on New Year’s Eve. I had intended to spend the day by myself for the second year in a row, but I was suckered into helping my coworker’s nephew, and his team of Kindergarten teachers, set up for an event that night. I was in for a pleasant surprise!

I was told by mainland teachers that Tokunoshima is boring during the New Year because there is nothing to do. I guess that depends on your personality and who your friends are. As it turned out, Isen has its own countdown party where lots of local artists come out to perform! It is kind of like New York’s New Year’s Party on TV but live, Isen style!

Among many traditions in Japan, it is a custom to place green plants with bamboo at the entrances of their doors during the New Year. It is also tradition to have a mochi placement like the one to the left. When I arrived back to work, my coworkers surprised me with a personalized one that had a nice caricature of me on it!

I would have to say shame on me for not remembering about New Year’s greetings with coworkers. When I arrived back to work, I was surprised to be rushed to an opening ceremony where we greeted everyone at the town hall, including Mr. Mayor. Luckily I was wearing semi-professional attire because everyone was in a suit! After, we returned to the BOE to cook and eat mochi. (My jokester coworker making it a real party haha!)

Remember the end of the year party I talked about in my last issue? Well, there is a New Year party called Shinnenkai (新年会). As seen above, there is a lot of food and more drinking – you know, because the Bōnenkai (忘年会) was not enough 😊

My Kachō was kind enough to open his home to all of us to host the party, and his wife – bless her wonderful soul – made all the delicious food you see.
I hope you are all ready for a very juicy section because the topic is none other than our favorite holiday of romance, Valentine’s Day! It is a day where couples exchange gifts from the heart, whether it is store bought or handmade items from food to clothes. Just kidding! Sorry if I started to pour too much sugar on the image in your mind. Actually, Valentine’s Day is quite different in Japan than it is in the United States. This holiday is meant for the men rather than it is for the women. Ladies, if you have that special someone in your life, this is the time to either confess or show it a little more (than you should be doing daily)! If it is a gift for that special someone, it is best to make it from hand and I know a lot of my friends who are married, or are dating someone, either made chocolate from scratch or some type of pastry. That does not mean store bought things are a no-no. If you are busy, it is the thought that counts. So really, the men benefit from this holiday because they receive all the treats! (I got some from my friends too, so that is not entirely true hehe.)

Is there a Single Awareness Day here? Like, what is that anyway? It does not exist here. I can say, though, that it is still that terrible reminder that you are single while other people have someone to give a gift to. You might be thinking, “Well, if I don’t have someone, then I save time and money because I do not need to give anyone a gift!” Wrong! There is still a custom where you buy gifts for your friends or coworkers – common courtesy, you know? (It is still mostly for the men.) It does not need to be super extravagant, though. I ended up buying my coworkers a cute little fountain display of chocolate that they could all share among themselves.

How did I present my chocolate? Great question! Actually, at the very end of January, and nearly all of February, I have been sick with a most terrible cold, and have been to the local clinics and Hospital more times than I wanted to go. I ran into work on February 14th, with a mask on my face to put the chocolate on the counter, say my greetings, and then I was out to the clinic with my sick self 😒 I spent the love-filled day at home in bed watching Netflix, and I made myself some killer tortilla soup! (I guess there is a Single Awareness Day!)
Here are just a few things you might not know about the Sakura trees in Japan:

- They are considered to be the national flower of Japan.
- Sakura trees usually bloom at the end of March or early April.
  - Trees cultivated for aesthetic purposes do not produce fruit.
- They do not stay in bloom for too long – maybe a week or so.
- There are many different breeds of Sakura trees.
  - Island Sakura trees are not the same trees you will see in places like Tokyo.

I would like to focus on the last point. The Cherry blossoms are, indeed, a different breed of Sakura from the ones found all over the mainland. The trees on this island bloom in early February and perhaps last, at most, one and a half to two weeks. The petals on the trees do not fall one by one like the more popularly known Sakura. Instead, the whole flower bud will fall off the tree. The colors of the petals are also a darker pink.

I have found at least two or three trees that are the same breed as the ones you can find in Tokyo. From what I have seen, their blooming period overlaps with the end cycle of the other breed of Sakura trees.
In Japan, they have something called Hanami (花見) which means flower viewing. People will take field trips just to view the Sakura trees in full bloom! Since I have been sick for almost the whole month of February, I was not feeling adventurous and did not want to leave my house. The thought of not being able to participate in the Hanami bothered me since it has been something I have always wanted to do. Unfortunately, I missed the Hanami season, but I still went looking for trees! One of my ALT friends gave me a location where he thought some trees might still be in bloom up north in the town of Amagi (天城町). To my disappointment, there were no Sakura trees in bloom there, but I could see some trees off in the distant mountain that looked like what I was looking for. I managed to drive there and I hit the jackpot! The place was a Hanami viewing space right next to an old folks’ home. Of course, not all the trees were still in bloom but a great deal of them was!

I also learned that the mountain beside the trees is actually an old mine. I was staring at a sign and a diagram about it, translating what I could read. I found the wooden stairs in the picture and wondered to myself if I should climb them. They looked really steep and I was afraid of running into some unfriendly critters. Of course, I climbed the stairs and realized how out of shape I was. I was hoping to see the mouth of one of the mine openings, but it has been closed for such a long time the brush around it was too wild to walk through. My reward for climbing the stairs was good exercise and more Sakura trees! All-in-all, my Sakura adventure was a success!
So what is this thing called white day? Is it a day where people go to a party and dress up in all white like in *White Chicks*? Absolutely... not! White Day happens on March 14th and it is basically like another Valentine’s Day – and if you have not guessed it yet, it is for women! Hooray! Gentlemen, if you received a special gift from a lady (or perhaps the woman you have been crushing on for a long time – yay you), it is now your turn to return the love and care (as you should be doing daily)!

Now, I could be wrong, but I remember in one of my Japanese classes in college, my Japanese TA told us it is customary for men to give women something three times the amount or time spent on the gift they gave to them on Valentine’s Day. Whether that is true or not, I do not know. All I know is that for the one fountain of chocolate I gave as a collective gift to the men in my BOE, I received one large bag full of goodies! Needless to say, my movie nights are like a personal home theater still! If I may also add, someone has been paying attention to the fact that my fruit of the year is the Apple because I got a delicious apple treat!
So it is that time of year in Japan, everyone. March is the end of the academic year. Honestly, the time I have spent here so far seems like a blur I can hardly believe it! I have met so many wonderful people, students and teachers alike. I had to say goodbye to three classes full of JHS 3rd years, a few Elementary school students who are transferring off the island and teachers who are being reassigned elsewhere. It has been a very emotional time because I realized that I wish I knew these people longer. I have only known them for such a short while, but I have had just enough time to appreciate their presence, their smiles, and their willingness to keep trying and working hard at their jobs (being a student or teacher). I was blessed to see one of my JHS's graduation ceremonies and it was nothing like my own JHS graduation. The kids here have had a friendship since childhood, always being in the same class since day one, and then coming together from the local schools when they started JHS. Seeing both the boys and girls shed tears because they know it is the end of the chapter touched my heart. Even though it is the end of this chapter for them, I am sure they understand a new one will begin and their stories are not over yet. They are just beginning. As for the teachers, I will miss working with the ones that are leaving, but I have learned so much from them and I know our relationships will still carry on. I guess I never realized how much of an impact we had on each other until we actually said goodbye.
Right after my first cold, I went on a bit of a field trip with my coworkers because we were asked to take part in a small “music video” about Isen Town, Tokunoshima. Check it out:


In Japan, March 3rd is a holiday called Hinamatsuri (雛祭り), or Dolls Day. If a family has a daughter, they will set up a display of dolls like the picture above (some more grand than others) displaying the Emperor, Empress, and their court. Hinamatsuri is a day to pray for, and celebrate, the health and happiness of girls.

Bullfighting (Tōgyū 闘牛) has been a big part of Tokunoshima’s culture for more than 500 years. It is not like Spain’s bullfighting where it is person vs bull. It is bull vs bull. I took the time to see a match because I thought it would be a great way to make conversation among my students who are more into bull fighting than school. I have already seen some positive feedback with students who saw me at the match! I have to try and make a breakthrough!

This is the phonics book that one of my JTEs asked me to teach from starting this next academic year to our 1st year JHS students. I am very excited about this because one thing I hate to hear is that English is too hard so therefore students can’t. I believe that last part handicaps students. **Yes, they can.** Sure, English is hard, but if they try, they can get better. I have seen ES 2nd graders do things 5th graders are supposed to do. I hope to incorporate more phonics and teach the alphabet at an earlier time (to stray away from the use of Katakana English). I hope this will improve students’ English learning!

*What is Katakana? This is: カタカナ

It is one of three writing systems used in the Japanese language. Though it is used to express non-Japanese words, the phonetic pronunciations of the characters are still distinctly Japanese. I believe that using it as an aid for English pronunciation hinders students from learning natural English pronunciation because each character, excluding a few, has a consonant and a vowel attached to it. Therefore a word like “Red” becomes “Reddo (レッド).”

This is Inutabu Misaki (犬田布岬). During the end of February and early March, whales are migrating north! I heard this is a great place for whale watching (though, I had already missed the mark of their migration when I took this photo).
A super special thanks to all of you who were patient in waiting for this newsletter. I really appreciate it. I honestly did not think much had happened during these past three months, but I guess I was wrong. Plenty has happened and I wish I could have added in every single detail, but then I think you would be reading a book series and not a newsletter☺️. I would also like to send a special shout out to the people I have become acquainted with while writing these newsletters. It was a bit of a shock to be contacted out of the blue but thank you for your encouraging words to keep writing about my experiences in Japan!

I hope you all enjoyed reading this newsletter and I will do my best to keep on top of myself in posting the next one. I want to cover more serious topics about my experiences inside and outside of the workplace. Up until now, you have only seen just the tip of the iceberg in my personal experiences. I will start to steer the focus to the workplace now that I have had enough time to mull things over in my mind.

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