

**Japan Reports** *I understand you went via Tokyo. Did you notice any differences arriving in Japan compared to other trips?*

**Sharon van Etten** Yes, it did seem noticeably quieter, almost sombre, I would say. It was a Sunday, it was a weekend in Tokyo, so I don't know if that had something to do with it, but it did certainly feel a lot quieter. As you mentioned before, a lot of the lights had been switched off in office buildings, restaurants and things like that, so it was a lot darker than it had been. One of the really good things was that Narita was very quiet so I got through the customs line in five minutes. I have spent an hour lining up in that line in the past to try to clear immigration. It was certainly quieter and I noticed that there were less Westerners over there. It was quite noticeable.

**JR** *Transportation was back up and running?*

**SvE** Transportation was fine. Before I went I obviously looked up timetables for my bullet train etc. and I did notice that they are still running on an amended schedule [to Iwate]. It's not the full schedule and the bullet trains, I not sure why, but they're running slower than what they used to, so it takes an extra 20 minutes or half an hour to get to Morioka from Tokyo. But still, they're running very regularly and almost at usual schedule.

I found no problems at all with transport. But certainly a bit of a darker sombre mood. At the same time there was also a very obvious sense of Gambaro Japan, Gambaro Tohoku, Gambaro Iwate. Just as an example even the 7 Eleven in Akasaka [in Tokyo] where I stayed all of the employees had little Gambaro Tohoku badges on. And I noticed some taxis driving around with Gambaro Tohoku stickers on the boot, so there was very much the sense that even in Tokyo people were thinking of Tohoku.

**JR** *So, before arriving in Iwate, how did you feel about what you might see there after the earthquake and tsunami disaster?*

**SvE** I had obviously been in contact with all my friends and people that I know over there since the earthquake and tsunami, so ... and luckily everyone I know was okay ...so I guess I was already reassured from having spoken to them and they had told me in the inland areas there wasn't too much of an obvious affect now. Obviously in the week after the disaster there were, you know, fuel shortages and power blackouts and shortages of some food and things like that. And they said that basically life was back to normal, but the coast was obviously very different. They warned me that I would be quite shocked that some towns that I expected to see would look very different, or in the case of Taro for example, that it would no longer be there, which was true. So, I was expecting to see I guess a lot of

differences, and I did. I was shocked when I went to the coast in Iwate and saw the extent of the damage, but at the same time I was also ...

**JR** *Sorry, had you been to Taro and Miyako City before?*

**SvE** I had, yes. So, even though I lived in Morioka which was inland, I was an Iwate-ken CIR, so I actually did quite a lot of work for the other cities around the prefecture [which] obviously didn't have enough international work to have fulltime CIR, but for certain events I would go to you know Miyako to translate at the international blue fin tuna preservation conference, for example. So, I had yes, been on occasion to these places. I hadn't lived there but I did know what they were like. So when I did go back for the first time since the disaster, particularly to Taro, it was a bit of a shock, seeing that there was a town there and I had specifically gone and had a look at the tsunami walls there because they were quite famous.

**JR** *Oh, you mean, when you had been living there in Morioka*

**SvE** When I had been living there. So they were quite world renowned, these high tech, very, very, 10 metre high concrete walls that would protect the town in the event of a tsunami and you know parts of the wall are still there but a lot of the wall is completely destroyed.

**JR** *Oh, really?*

**SvE** Yeah, so it was a big change, but I was also positively surprised by how much had been cleaned up. I had thought that would still be more debris or garbage, I guess, around.

**JR** *Well, I guess it was only half a year since the tsunami when you visited.*

**SvE** It was just over five months. I went at the end of August, so it was about 5½ months. And I had had friends who had been JETs in Iwate that had gone back to volunteer in those five months since the disaster and they were still very involved in construction and removing waste, so I had presumed that there would still be more rubble around, and there might be in towns such as Rikuzentakada that were more heavily affected, but in Miyako and Taro I was quite surprised that it pretty ... all the main stuff has kind of been cleared away. It's no longer [in] streets. It's in piles on the edge of town, but because there's so much of it, it's just sitting there waiting for them to decide what to do with it.

**JR** *So overall what sort of impressions did you take away from that visit to Taro and to Miyako City?*

**SvE** Overall? That obviously it was just such a large scale event that completely affected the towns and in some cases, up to 10% of certain towns in Iwate had been lost in terms of the number of people that had been lost to this disaster. But at the same time I was also impressed by how people there are just trying to get on with their lives, rebuilding. In Miyako, on the main street which had the wave go up it, many houses are already you know being rebuilt, businesses are being reopened. They still don't have traffic lights working which is interesting so they have little *omawari-sans* with his orange stick on each corner, but you know, I was actually positively surprised by how much has been done, particularly in these communities, but I do wonder if perhaps there are some communities further south which may not be...

**JR** *In that same situation. Yeah.*

Yes.

**JR** *'Cause, Taro, was that a fishing town originally?*

**SvE** It was, yeah. And Miyako as well. It was the main industry. So what I believe the prefecture has done, is, because obviously the fishing fleet was lost, they've actually I think bought new boats for the fishing cooperatives so that the fishermen can go out and start earning a living again. I don't know what the situation is, if they have to repay them, over time or whatever.

**JR** *It certainly sounds very organised, anyway.*

**SvE** Certainly, what they've done is just gone in and said, "Look, what we need to do is get people working again," and so they've provided some of the facilities for them to do that, 'cause it is such a big part of the local community particularly in Miyako and Taro.

**JR** *I guess it's hard to judge from a short visit but I know you also visited towns, sorry, schools in Taro and Miyako, how did you find the children's spirits?*

**SvE** Overall, I went to two very separate schools. I went to a special education school, so a school for kids with special needs, and they were actually incredibly *genki*, they were really great kids, and even though specific individuals had lost their house or members of their family they seemed to be quite *genki*. And ... it was actually really impressive to see the way the community had come together and they were receiving a lot of support from their teachers. But the teachers did explain that they've had to get counsellors come in and talk

to the students and things like that. And from the prefecture's point of view they have set aside budget for counselling in schools

**JR** *Okay ... in an ongoing manner?*

**SvE** Ongoing. Specifically to address the mental health issues of school children, so they have some sort of budget set aside.

In the high school, I guess most of the schools are on higher ground and are separated a little bit from the towns and they were all at school when the tsunami happened. Luckily most of the school kids were actually okay. And in most cases I think they had to stay there for a couple of days, definitely that night, and in some case for a couple of days afterwards until their family could you know recover them or join up with them. But I mean it's hard to say. I wasn't at the high school for very long. The kids sort of seemed like typical high school students, very, kind of quiet and shy and wanting to sleep on the desk. One thing that I did notice and hadn't thought about before I went was that because in many cases they had lost all their possessions that were in the houses all the kids lost school uniforms so there was a charity kind of set up to donate school uniforms from other places in Japan that had delivered them.

**JR** *So they were a little bit mix and match, were they?*

**SvE** They were a bit mix and match, but while I was there and I was in this English class and helping out, and I was out the front doing a little quiz with the teacher in English, all these cameras turned up, and I thought, "Oh, here's the media and they've come to look at me," and they were taking pictures of all the kids in their school uniforms and they were actually reporting on the charity to donate school uniforms and they completely ignored the fact that I was at the front.

So yeah, I think there probably are problems, I wasn't there long enough to see any, but I do know that there are programs step up to try to help the kids in the immediate term with things that they need such as books and school uniforms but also in the longer term to deal with mental health issues and any kind of anxiety that comes up.

**JR** *Changing the topic a little, I know that you also went to Hiraizumi in Iwate Prefecture which was, which had just been listed as a UNESCO world heritage site.*

Yes, 29<sup>th</sup> of June, I believe.

**JR** *How was that?*

**SvE** That was great. I obviously having lived in Iwate for three years had been to Hiraizumi many times. Obviously on my own trips because it's a fantastic place but also if we had visitors to the prefecture it was one of the areas we would show ... often I would go there to interpret for dignitaries, so I did know quite a lot about the region and the history because I knew it beforehand having gone there so many times. Even back then ten years ago, I remember that they were, the local people were pushing very strongly for it to be recognised by UNESCO. For it to finally have happened is just fantastic, particularly this year. It's really kind of a rallying point for people in Iwate to, well, to feel proud of something, that despite the horrible event that happened in March there's some good news finally. But also they're really hoping the it draws international tourists and local tourists from within Japan as well because that area around Hirazumi was basically unaffected by the disaster and it's operating as usual. In fact there are new facilities that have now been built anticipating the extra tourists that will come as a result of this announcement. So, hopefully for the prefecture it will be a fantastic magnet for people around Japan and around the world to come and see some of the traditional Japanese culture in Iwate.

**JR** *I know that your trip also included a couple of other tourist experiences. Given the circumstances how did you feel about you know just carrying on as an ordinary tourist?*

**SvE** Yeah, it was a little bit strange and it was, again like in Tokyo, it was quite obvious that there just were no other tourists there. It was a bit quiet. But I also felt that it was important, that it had to happen – a.) so that the local people could feel their lives were getting back to normal, and b.) to directly contribute to the local community.

So for example in Jodogahama which is a beautiful beach in Miyako,

**(JR)** *Hm, yes, it's stunning.*

which I had been to many times in the past, I went to again this time, and luckily the beach hadn't been affected, the beach itself hadn't been affected by the disaster, a lot of the facilities around it were completely washed away, but luckily in August they've opened a new tourist centre there.

**JR** *So they're obviously keen to get back on their feet.*

**SvE** They're keen to get back on their feet, because in addition to fishing, tourism is a big local industry. So they've rebuilt the roads back down to the beach, opened a new tourist centre and I think boat tours are starting again. So it's certainly something that's, I think it's important and you know people want to go and see the area and see how it's doing and I

think it's important that they do that and spend time in the local communities and spend money and help them out that way as well..

**JR** *Well, finally, do you have anything else that you would like to share with readers of Japan Reports?*

**SvE** Goodness.

Well, I assume that readers of *Japan Reports* are people who are interested in Japan and have probably been to Japan before. So they are probably quite concerned about how Japan is going, so I would like to reassure them that people in Tohoku are doing well and getting on with their lives, they're trying to rebuild their lives, and they are very grateful for the assistance that Australia in particular and you know people all over the world have provided through charities and donations. What I would suggest though from now on the way that we can really help people in Tohoku is to go there, to not put off plans because 'maybe we can't go there', 'maybe there're power shortages'. There are some differences but Japan is certainly running as normal, it's business as usual. So I would encourage people to go to Tohoku, particularly if they've never been there, it's a fantastic part of Japan, and go to tourist places like Hiraizumi that are operating as normal and have a wonderful time, see a wonderful part of Japan and also know that you are helping out the people by spending time in their community, contributing to the local economy.

**JR** *Thank you very much for that, Sharon. Thanks for your time.*