

# Road-trip to Cowra

**Sakura** or cherry blossoms have long inspired poets in Japan. They seem to have worked their magic on the Consulate's new Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program Coordinator, Rafael Villadiego. A former Assistant Language Teacher in Nagasaki (2010-2013), he joined other JET alumni on a road-trip to Cowra. He shares his first impressions of Cowra and a little of its history, rather poetically!

*Five centimetres per second...*

I saw a film once. It surmised that *sakura* petals fell to earth at five centimetres per second. I had always been meaning to test that theory. So it was that in the early hours of Saturday 27 September, along with members of the New South Wales chapter of the **Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme Alumni Association (JETAA-NSW)**, I made my way to Sydney's Central Station in preparation for an intrepid road-trip to Cowra, to attend the 25th Annual Sakura Matsuri. Packing into a minibus for the five hour journey out of the city into the untamed countryside, this marked the second visit for about half the participants, while the rest of us were making our first pilgrimage to the historic region. Venturing inland over the picturesque Blue Mountains before turning off at Bathurst, the journey was filled with animated conversation, random pit stops and of course, road-trip bingo.

**The town of Cowra** in regional NSW is situated about 300 kilometres west of Sydney. During the Second World War, it was the site of the Number 12

posthumously awarded the George Cross.

Despite such inauspicious beginnings, relations between Australia and Japan healed over the intervening decades and friendship has quite literally flowered in Cowra. Today it is the home of the beautiful Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre which was opened in 1979, and the town is the site of the only Japanese War Cemetery in Australia, which was established in 1963.

**The annual Cherry Blossom Festival** is held at the Cowra

*shamisen* and *enka*; martial art displays of karate, sumo and aikido; cultural demonstrations of bonsai and tea ceremony; as well as offering the chance to try calligraphy, origami, kite making and



PHOTO: May Chew

**The beautiful Cowra Japanese Garden**

sake tasting. JETAA-NSW members were more than happy to participate in the day's program of activities, along with the many other attendees taking in the beautiful weather and lovely scenery. There was also an evening reception which offered a rare glimpse into the garden after dark.

This year also marked the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Cowra Breakout and there was a **Service of Respect** held on Sunday morning, where JETAA-NSW member were on hand to witness the wreath laying ceremonies at the Australian and Japanese War Cemeteries by dignitaries from both countries.

Unfortunately, as with all good things, even epic journeys must come to an end, and after a brief visit to the grounds of the former POW camp, it was time to make the long trek back to Sydney.

But what about that theory about the speed at which *sakura* petals fall, you ask? Don't worry, I did not forget. I guess I just realised that perhaps some things were better left unknown. Proving the theory right or wrong will not change the fact that cherry blossoms are beautiful, and that they are, unfortunately, all too fleeting—a little bit like the human condition. Perhaps that is the point. Someone once told me that a lifetime spent searching for a perfect *sakura* bloom is not a wasted life. I think that is true. So I continue searching...



PHOTO: May Chew

**Members of JETAA-NSW and Rafael [left]**

Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre and celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. The festival provides an annual showcase for Japanese arts, traditional crafts and cultural activities, amidst a picturesque backdrop of sakura in full bloom.

There is a gentle juxtaposition to the surrounds as the manicured Japanese seasonal plant varieties are backed by towering Australian natives - a fitting testament perhaps to the resilience of the bond between the nations.

**The family fun day** on Saturday incorporated traditional musical performances of *taiko* drums, *shakuhachi*,



**Deputy Consul-General Katsutoshi Miyakawa and Cowra Shire Mayor Bill West lay a wreath at the Service of Respect.**

Prisoner of War Compound and became infamous for the 'Cowra Breakout' on 5 August 1944. The breakout resulted in the death of 231 Japanese soldiers and the wounding of over 100 others. It also led to the deaths of four Australian soldiers – Private Benjamin Gower Hardy, Private Ralph Jones, Private Charles Henry Shepherd and Lieutenant Harry Doncaster – of whom Privates Hardy and Jones were

**Applications for the 2015-2016 JET Program are NOW OPEN and must be submitted to the Embassy of Japan in Canberra by C.O.B. Friday 21 November 2014.**