

## FIVE YEARS IN FUKUSHIMA

### TRANSCRIPT: ALISON LAM INTERVIEW BY EMAIL WITH JAPAN REPORTS

→ SEE END FOR ALISON'S TRAVEL TIPS IN FUKUSHIMA

#### TRANSCRIPT BEGINS

#### Japan Reports: Was it your first time to go to Japan?

**Alison Lam:** This was my third time in Japan. I first went to Japan for a holiday in 2001 and for the second time, I returned as an exchange student for Kwansai Gakuin University (in Hyogo Prefecture) in 2005.

**JR:** Were you based at one school in Fukushima City or did you regularly visit several schools? Could you describe your teaching situation for us? [It might be appropriate to include your impressions of the students and the teachers you worked with here.]

**AL:** I went to 3 junior high schools and 5 elementary schools. Each week, I could go up to 4 different schools. I spent more time at the elementary schools (ES) than my junior high schools (JHS).

Prior to applying for the JET programme, I had the CELTA/TESOL certification but it didn't really prepare me for teaching children. I remembered how useless I felt when I started my first JHS classes. I was a human tape recorder and after I performed my part, I just stood in the corner. I was like an expensive school equipment that was being used for superficial purposes. The students were impressed that I was a foreigner for only about 5 minutes and from there, I had to work hard to prove my worth as a teacher.

I am forever grateful to the JTEs (Japanese Teacher of English) in JHS who always allowed me a small amount of class time to try my activities. My first lessons weren't the greatest activities and some even failed. I did feel disheartened but you learn from your mistakes and try again. Once I learnt how to make better materials and lessons, I started to enjoy teaching. When I walked into a classroom, some of the students broke into big smiles or even started cheering and clapping. It was extremely flattering and my ego was terribly inflated.

I got so used to doing it my way that I eventually became the main teacher and the JTE became my assistant in my classes. Even the new JTEs that come in during April let me take over the whole class. I did wonder whether I was being too aggressive. The teachers in Japan are like a student's third parent and they are the first point of contact should the student be involved in any trouble. Because my JTEs were so involved in the activities and welfare of their students, they didn't always have time to sit down with me and plan a lesson together. One JTE kindly told me that my initiatives meant it took away the burden on them to come up with a team teaching plan. I continued on with my 'aggressiveness'.

I didn't have to ask anyone's permission to be allocated a portion of time to teach English in ES. The homeroom teachers (HRT) automatically gave me the whole class. Based on my

experiences in JHS, I thought at first that it was normal to conduct English classes in Japanese. I also had little faith in the abilities of my younger students. Mark, my fellow ALT colleague, proved these assumptions incorrect, and from then on I conducted my classes in simple English only. I ignored the lone student who would yell out ‘eigo wakkanai’\*.

\* I don’t understand English.

**JR:** Fukushima City is a prefectural capital and quite a large city of just under 300,000 people. What sort of a place is it to live in? Were you able to make connections with the local community you were living in? [It might be appropriate to mention any community groups, festivals or hobbies/activities you got involved with here.]

**AL:** Even though Fukushima City is the prefectural capital, it feels more like a quiet suburb. I always loved coming back to the quietness of Fukushima after my travels. Fukushima City has very few attractions and at first glance, it probably looks like a place that’s not worth visiting. You really need to hop on a bike and go outside the city centre – I explored temples on hill tops, I visited various parks to see the *sakura*\*\* and I found amazing restaurants tucked away from the main roads.

When I came to Fukushima, I truly had regrets about applying for the JET program. I had the terrible realisation that I was on my own living in a foreign country and I had to start from scratch. I’m wary of attending social events and making small talk with strangers but I had to overcome my reluctance and go out to meet people.

I went into any establishment that caught my eye. If the owners had a genuine interest in talking to me, then I would make an effort to visit the place regularly. When it was time for me to say my goodbyes, I was surprised by how many people I knew. Even during my last months in Fukushima, I was still making new friends. I live in a small suburb in Sydney and I barely have any meaningful interactions with the locals. I’ve never experienced being part of a community before. There was a ramen grandmother who would always say *okaeri*\*\*\*, the bike grandpa with whom I would have ramen and gyoza on a Friday night and the ice cream man who thanked me for being a “heavy repeater” (regular customer) among others.

I’m not a foodie but I was always on the lookout for restaurants and cafes that I’ve never been to before. It can be easy to get into the unhealthy habit of staying in your apartment all day. I forced myself to hop on my bike and go somewhere (no matter how far), just to eat. It was always a small victory for me to screw up my courage to go solo dining. Facebook played a part in forming this new hobby since I would regularly boast about my exploits online.

I joined ESS (the English Speaking Society) and this club provided an opportunity for Japanese speakers to practice their English with foreigners, once a week. I enjoyed these informal exchanges and I was always impressed by how hard my Japanese friends worked on improving their English. I often shared my Australian snacks with ESS and I taught them the fine art of the Tim Tam slam. Their waistlines probably expanded considerably too.

\*\* cherry blossoms or cherry trees

\*\*\* short for *okaeri nasai* = welcome back/home

**JR:** You left for Fukushima soon after the Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant accident caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake. Didn't you have concerns about taking up your JET position in Fukushima City before you left? Did family and friends here in Australia understand your decision to go and live in Fukushima?

**AL:** Prior to receiving notification of my placement, I remember thinking that surely CLAIR would not place any of its JET applicants in danger. Once I heard about my placement, I had to ask for a few days to decide whether I should accept or not. I received various responses. My father and my sisters said 'yes' without a second thought. My close friends said 'It's up to you'. I didn't try my mum and grandmother as it would have been a resounding 'no'.

I resorted to asking my GP for advice and he suggested that I look up WHO reports about Fukushima's situation. It was probably a blessing that I could make the decision a few months after the accident – Fukushima must have been in a state of chaos and uncertainty before it could go back to its everyday routine. The worst of it was over and that distance in time and space helped me make a decision.

Once I said 'yes', it was an immense relief. I just had to focus on making preparations to go to Japan.

I had also failed in my first attempt to get into the JET program. I was placed on a waiting list but an offer did not come through. I had to wait for more than a year to try again. If I refused the Fukushima placement, I was allowed to apply for the next year due to the special circumstances. I didn't want to wait for another year and go through the arduous application process again.

**JR:** You stayed in Fukushima for five years, the maximum number of years possible for most JET positions. That means you renewed your yearly contract with JET four times. What made you decide to stay for so long on the JET Program?

**AL:** I decided that if I did succeed in my second attempt for the JET program, I should try the full 5 years. There were other factors that strengthened this resolve.

I grew very fond of the students I taught. I was very fortunate that I could watch my favourite group of students grow up from Year 5 elementary students to Year 9 junior high school students. My students were often at their most charming just before they graduate – I once had a funny conversation about 'kabe-don' and another memorable one was about a boy's dream to become an engineer so that he can help rebuild Tohoku. I also found that the longer I stayed, I would eventually come into contact with a few of the parents of my students. I was very humbled when they thanked me for being their child's English teacher.

I have worked a few years in customer service in a corporate environment. It can be stressful and even demoralising when you work under deadlines and angry clients. I knew I was at the bottom of the school totem pole but I was always treated with respect, courtesy and appreciation. I enjoyed the slower pace of life and my work problems did not go home with me. I was always ridiculously happy whenever my JTE would say "The kids saw you today and demanded to know when you'll be teaching." I had never experienced this kind of job satisfaction before.

I also wanted to visit all the prefectures in Japan and this goal came about because of Hello Kitty. My friend loves Hello Kitty and being the amazing friend I was, I bought her a few Hello Kitty mobile phone straps as a gift. Gradually, I decided that they made really good travel mementoes. I wondered if I could travel to all the prefectures in order to collect these straps. I started to plan in advance for my travels in all upcoming school breaks and long weekends. I've been to all the prefectures except for Okinawa and I'm now the proud owner of hundreds of these mementoes. The staff in my office at *Jissen Center* (福島市教育実践センター) often commented that I've seen more of Japan than the average Japanese person. They also laughed about my obsession with Hello Kitty.

**JR:** Did your expectations of Japan before going on the program match your ultimate experiences?

**AL:** Whenever I looked back on my student exchange, I saw missed opportunities. I was too timid to travel outside of the Kansai area nor make more friends amongst the exchange students and Japanese students. The JET program gave me a second chance to make amends.

I made numerous friends from different age groups and countries. I would not have met such diverse characters in my social circle within Australia. It was hard to meet Japanese people within my own age in Fukushima but I came to really enjoy the company of the 'ojii-sans' and 'obaa-sans'. They were always there whenever I felt like a chat and they doted on me. I got along with the bike grandpa so well that I would often tell him off for smoking and drinking too much.

I discovered that I like travelling around Japan on my own. I often took the local train lines and I liked watching the scenery change from the city to the country. I marvelled that I could see mountains, gorges and forests up close. I was always humbled whenever strangers expressed their appreciation to me for visiting their prefecture or their amazement of a single woman travelling around Japan.

I thought that the students would be disappointed that I didn't look like a foreigner especially since my predecessor was a Westerner but they looked beyond my appearance. Sometimes I received praise for expertly using chopsticks and then I realised that I hadn't told them that I'm also Chinese.

I enjoyed the creativity that teaching allowed. I could incorporate my love for anime, manga and video games into my lessons. I always found a way to turn zombies, Doraemon and Pokémon into games. I knew I did a good job when the students would come over to help me set up my lessons or beg for souvenirs of their favourite characters.

### **Alison's Travel Recommendations in Fukushima**

Catch a special bus to see the beautiful flowers at **Hanamiyama** in April. You can visit the main slope and pick Course A, B or C to walk on. Many visitors do not know about the northern slope and this is even more beautiful than the main slope. The information brochures do not mention this slope and there's a faded signpost that points out this 'secret' route.

See the **Fukushima Straw Sandal Festival** in the main road of Fukushima City in August. Also catch the Tanabata decorations in Paseo Dori and Bunka Dori.

Visit the **Nihonmatsu Chrysanthemum Festival** in the ruins of Kasumiga Castle in October. Historical figures are decorated with chrysanthemums and each year the theme changes.

Try the **Koori Machi Burger Summit** in October. This is a new event that started in 2014. This gives you a chance to try the regional burgers around Japan.

See the **fire festival “Taimatsu Akashi” in Sukagawa** in November. Huge torches are carried to the summit of Mount Goro and then set alight at night.

You will need to rent a car to visit natural wonders like **Abukuma Cave** in Tamura. There are walkways and platforms that make it easy to explore. If you're feeling a little more adventurous, try Irimizu Cave as well. You will need sturdy water proof shoes and a headlight since you'll be walking through water in the dark.

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