

# Satogaeri - returning home



This year marks the beginning of the 30th Anniversary commemorations for the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, the flagship Japanese government exchange program that encourages young people from across the world to live and work in Japan as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) and Coordinators of International Relations (CIRs) at local schools, boards of education and government offices. As part of these commemorations, the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR), which oversees the program, instigated an official “Satogaeri Project”, inviting former JET participants to reconnect with their Japanese “hometowns”.

Mr Rafael Villadiego, JET Program Coordinator at the Consulate-General of Japan in Sydney, made his own private *satogaeri* in November 2015 to Sasebo on the island of Kyushu. It made him reflect on the nature of hellos and good-byes.

There are certain words in the Japanese language that lack a direct counterpart in English. Perhaps that is the point. While one can eventually explain their meaning – in a round-about fashion using far too many words – there is an elusive grace and subtle simplicity that must necessarily remain lost in translation. And therein lies the richness of foreign languages: their ability to capture such subtle nuances with a depth of feeling altogether absent from one’s native tongue.

Two such expressions are *Tadaima* 「ただいま」 – spoken upon returning home – and *Okaeri* 「おかえり」 – spoken in welcome to those returning. Used on a daily basis in millions of households across Japan, they have perhaps lost some of their significance due to familiarity. But there remains a sincerity behind these exchanges that instils a warm sentiment of welcome and a genuine feeling of home.

I found myself pondering these words as I embarked on my own personal *satogaeri* 「里帰り」 to my Japanese hometown of Sasebo in Nagasaki Prefecture. While I had spent three unforgettable years of my life here working for the municipal board of education and riding my bicycle back and forth across the myriad hills to visit my scattered elementary and high schools, I always wondered if these words were truly appropriate.

I recited them in my head, trying them on for size, as I first stepped off the airplane. I breathed them quietly to myself as the bus slowly pulled up to the sleepy bus station. I whispered them softly as I entered my old school. I hesitantly exchanged them as I greeted old friends, teachers and students. And I mumbled them between mouthfuls as I bit into my favourite Sasebo burger.



And as I watched the sunlight shine between the autumn branches in my local park – by the way, there is a Japanese word for that as well – *komorebi* 「木漏れ日」 – I honestly felt that the expressions finally fitted into place and I could say them out loud without hesitation or question. They say that home is a place you grow up wanting to leave and grow old trying to get back to... Perhaps I found that all too elusive piece of home – or perhaps more aptly “peace” – without even realising it.

So it was that when it finally came time for me to depart – after all too short a stay – I did not say *sayonara* 「さよなら」 – in final goodbye – but rather said *ittekimasu* 「いってきます」 – in fond farewell but with an expectation of return. And my friends replied confidently with *itterasshai* 「いってらっしゃい」 in reciprocation of the sentiment.

Text and photos by Rafael Villadiego



## 5th Anniversary Memorial of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake & Tsunami

The 11th of March 2016 will mark five years since the devastating earthquake and tsunami disaster struck the east coast of the Tohoku region in northern Japan.

Members and friends of the Japanese community will hold a memorial service on **Friday 11 March** at **St Matthew’s Church in Manly** (Sydney). The next day, **Saturday 12 March**, music, performances, stalls, martial arts demonstrations and hands-on activities will bring Japan to Manly Corso (the pedestrian area connecting the ferry wharf and Manly Beach). St Matthew’s Church will also be a venue for music, performances and a photo exhibition on the Saturday.

The commemorative event is being organised by the Japan Club of Sydney, JCS Rainbow Project and the Japan Foundation Sydney.

For details of performers and activities see—

[www.tohoku2016.com](http://www.tohoku2016.com)



In March, JETAA NSW will again hold its **BIG BENTO fundraising event**. Proceeds go to support victims of the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake.

Also in March, JETAA NSW is planning a **screening of the 2014 film, Tohoku Tomo**, which tells the story of international volunteers who have helped with the recovery and ongoing rebuilding process in Tohoku.

For details, see [www.jetaansw.org](http://www.jetaansw.org)