

## Island life by Dominic Balasuriya — an ALT on JET

*Mr Dominic Balasuriya is an Assistant Language Teacher on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program on a remote island of Japan where he has thrown himself into local community life.*

Just over a month after I arrived in Japan, my supervisor asked me if I wanted to carry a shrine. It would be very heavy, he warned. Unsure of what to expect, and more than a little apprehensive, I agreed.

I found myself helping shoulder an immense portable wooden shrine (mikoshi) at the local festival. In teams of ten, we took turns carrying the shrine through the town, all the while shouting 'Wasshoi! Wasshoi!' Along the way, we stopped at local restaurants and received small gifts of food and drink. Afterwards, there was a



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barbecue with local delicacies, and we all talked long into the night. It was the perfect way to throw myself into life on the remote island of Tsushima.

Far from Tokyo and Kyoto, Tsushima is technically part of Nagasaki Prefecture, in the south-western Kyushu area. In reality, however, Tsushima is closer to Korea than Japan. Convenience stores, usually a ubiquitous part of Japanese life, are nowhere to be found: the nearest is almost a two hour drive away. I teach at a single high school, with just under 100 students.

In short, Tsushima is truly an unusual place, and with that has come several incredibly unique opportunities.

Towards the end of my first year on Tsushima, I went to a local restaurant for dinner one night, only to find it filled with my students and teachers. The kendo team was having a farewell party for their coach. To my surprise, they called me over and asked me to join them. At the end of the night, the students



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asked me if I would come and try doing kendo with them.

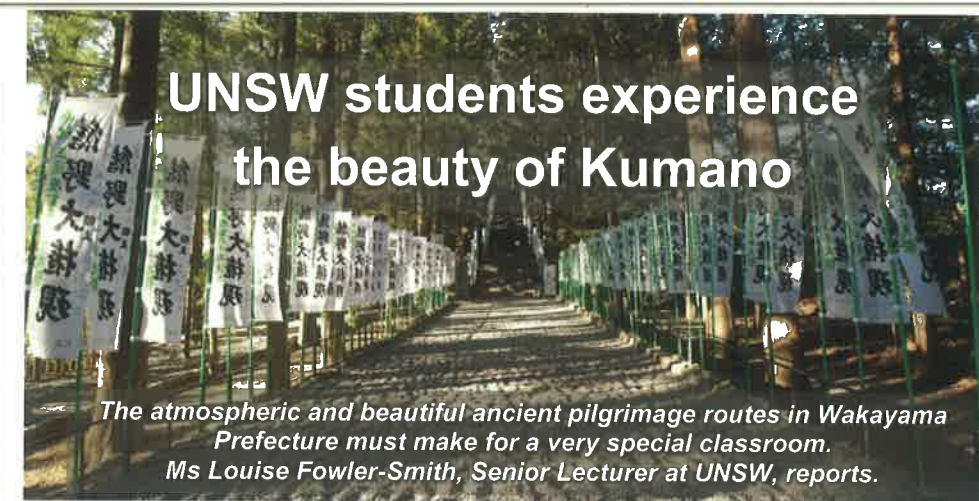
I had never even considered doing a martial art, but for the next month, I visited twice a week and simply watched, taking notes on the language they used. Encouraged by the teacher, I bought a bamboo sword, and spent months practising how to swing it before I finally borrowed a set of armour and joined the students. Today, I have my own armour, I practise kendo four or five

times a week, and my goal is to obtain the first dan (equivalent to a "black belt") in the next year.

In this way, living in Tsushima has given me opportunities that I could never have even dreamed of. With such a small population on the island, it has been so easy to make connections with local people. In return, I have tried my best to give back to the community that I live in. When I heard that local people were interested in learning English, I organised to start a volunteer English Conversation class, and was very gratified to see that so many people were interested in joining. When a friend needed help editing *The Nagazasshi*, an English language magazine, I volunteered to help out. Today, as Director of *The Nagazasshi*, I lead a team of volunteer ALTs who write, publish, and edit the magazine in our spare time.

In this way, I have found that being unafraid to try new things and approach new people has been incredibly rewarding. For those considering applying for the JET Programme, don't be worried that your placement might not be in a large city or town. Your JET placement truly is what you make of it.

## UNSW students experience the beauty of Kumano



*The atmospheric and beautiful ancient pilgrimage routes in Wakayama Prefecture must make for a very special classroom. Ms Louise Fowler-Smith, Senior Lecturer at UNSW, reports.*

In January 2017, a group of 20 UNSW students from the Faculties of Art and Design and Architecture were in Wakayama as part of their studies. The students were undertaking an elective which focused on the cultural significance of nature, both contemporary and historical, using the 1000-year-old Kumano-Kodo pilgrimage route in the Kii Mountains of Wakayama Prefecture, Japan.

A World Heritage Site, the pilgrimage route is cared for by the prefectural and national governments as well as by the many villages and small towns through which the pilgrims walk. By walking the pilgrimage, students were able to witness many of the hundreds of temples and shrines that are located along the pathway, which crosses a rural landscape of waterfalls, cedar forests, mountain ridges, vegetable farms, orange groves, tea fields, and clear rivers winding through narrow valleys. The students' pilgrimage ended at the three grand shrines of Hongu, Hayatama and Nachi Taisha.

All those who walked the Kumano Kodo expressed how beautiful the environment is and what feelings of peace and quiet they experienced while walking. Some sensed a strong feeling of the spiritual in these mountains, which has stayed with them long after returning to Australia.



The course was written and taught by UNSW Senior Lecturer, Louise Fowler-Smith, in collaboration with Dr Kumi Kato and staff and students from Wakayama University in Japan.



*The UNSW class also visited Koyasan, a legendary peak on which the monk Kūkai founded the first Shingon Buddhist monastery in Japan in 816.*

Lectures ahead of the walk gave students background on the locations to be visited and specific knowledge that would enhance the pilgrimage.

After completing the pilgrimage, students returned to the village of Futakawa, located along the pilgrimage trail, where they worked in teams to construct a large public artwork in the former Futakawa Primary School, now closed due to population decrease.

The project aimed to bring a new purpose to the school building and to promote cross-cultural engagement between the Australian students and local Japanese community members. The community hosted a series of creative activities and events, in which many local children participated.

Back in Sydney, an exhibition of the students' final work was installed in one of the UNSW Art & Design galleries in May 2017.

The artwork is a visual representation of the walking journey along the Kumano Kodo and Koyasan trails. It referenced the imagery from both the physical environment as well as local folklore connected to the Kumano Kodo and Koyasan regions whose significance was shared with the Australian students through communication with the local people.

It was displayed on the school's large 24-panel window to be seen from one of the main roads. It attracted a large positive reception from the community which led to the work being kept on permanent display.

## SMASH! スマシ

SYDNEY MANGA AND ANIME SHOW

19-20 August, Rosehill Gardens

Fans are getting ready for Sydney's premier Japanese pop-culture convention — SMASH! 2017.

Last year's convention attracted more than 15,000 people across the weekend and a similar turnout is expected this year.

SMASH President Mr Andrew Qiu said, "SMASH! is an annual opportunity to dress up as your favourite character for the day, catch up with fellow peers, and learn more about Japan and its unique culture."

"With an increase in pop-culture conventions in recent years, we're determined to showcase the best of Japan to the Western audience in Australia. This year, attendees can expect many unique events and attractions at SMASH! 2017, including guest panels, cosplay competitions, Maid Café, Itasha cars, fashion shows, arts and crafts, and Gundam building. With more exciting announcements to come, we cannot wait to unveil our final plans for SMASH! 2017."

Among the special guests already confirmed are Japanese manga artist Asami Hagiwara and Japanese voice actors



© SMASH!

Shizuka Itoh, Shiori Mikami and Daisuke Sakaguchi. According to SMASH, there is significant demand to bring Japanese voice talent to the convention every year.

[www.smash.org.au](http://www.smash.org.au)

### Who is SMASH?

SMASH stands for the Sydney Manga and Anime Show. SMASH Inc. is a non-profit organisation created by fans for fans, which aims to create an open and affordable avenue that serves as a meeting point for fans with an emphasis on art, creativity and community involvement.

In 2016, SMASH Inc. received a Japanese Foreign Minister's Commendation in recognition of its contribution encouraging broad interest in Japan among young Australians, which has provided motivation to learn the Japanese language.

## Sydney Cherry Blossom Festival

18-27 August 2017

The Sydney Cherry Blossom Festival is another great opportunity to enjoy Japanese culture in Sydney and the beauty of early spring.

Drawing visitors from across Sydney, this Cumberland City Council event is in the Auburn Botanic Gardens. Many events showcasing Japan's traditional and popular culture are held over the two weekends (19-20 and 26-27 August) and this year there are also events held on certain weekdays.

Admission is charged, but is free for Cumberland LGA residents and on certain days for those who dress in cosplay or wear a yukata or kimono.

Over the two weeks of the festival, more than 60,000 people visit the gardens.