

Roisin Wade – Kagawa Ken, Sakaide, 1993-1996

Roisin stood transfixed as she watched the young Japanese couple hoist their catch onto the boat in Indonesia and promptly begin to prepare the freshest sashimi she'd had. She had grown up in a small town in Ireland and prior to this surf trip to Southeast Asia, Roisin had never known any Japanese people. She was captivated by their attention to detail and overall positivity. The genuine excitement they showed during their week at sea really made an impression—so much so that when Roisin went back to Ireland, she wrote to Embassy of Japan in Ireland to find out how to get herself to Japan. What started out as curiosity about her quirky traveling companions brought her into the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program.

A year later, Roisin was on a plane heading to Sakaide City in Kagawa Prefecture. She was a little nervous going in, unsure if her relaxed vibe would clash with the images she had in her mind of formal, strict Japanese workplaces. She need not have worried, however, as she found herself in a very welcoming, warm environment. Sakaide City is located on the smallest main island in Japan, Shikoku, and as such, confers a more relaxed feel. Roisin was earmarked for a pilot program; she would be the first—and at the time, the only—Assistant Language Teacher in the prefecture to teach at the elementary school level.

Teaching was an absolute blast for Roisin. Rotating between eight schools each week, her schools ranged from ones with a few hundred kids to others with less than ten. She had fun with the students, as most of the curriculum involved active play and games in English. She also made some great friends within the schools, particularly with the Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs), her counterparts within the formal classrooms.

Her JTEs often invited her on day trips to see different cultural and historical sites in the region, and for even longer weekend getaways. She recalls one particularly memorable trip to Kochi Prefecture. Before coming to Japan, Roisin hadn't associated the country with natural beauty, but that weekend gave her a whole new perspective. She was taken aback by the serene mountainsides and pure, deserted beaches. Visiting the ancient temples and castles, she felt a profound gratitude that she was getting to experience true Japan, and at her side, her local Japanese friends as her personal guides.

There weren't many foreigners in the region, so Roisin gained a level of notoriety in the city. Word traveled quickly that she had no idea how to cook and suddenly, there was a weekly cooking lesson arranged just for her! She was constantly invited to local events and festivals. Because she was one of the only English speakers in Sakaide, she would be asked to proofread compositions in English, write articles in the city bulletin and was tapped whenever an international function took place. During the pre-Olympic trials for Eurasia in Shikoku, she became the event announcer, mixing with the coaches and teams. She even hobnobbed with the Irish diplomat as he toured through Tokyo. Roisin still can't believe how many opportunities she was afforded, both for personal and professional development. She formed some great relationships throughout and gained an incredible amount of confidence along the way. The people of Sakaide really welcomed Roisin with an incredible amount of hospitality and enthusiasm.

Months later, roles would be reversed and it would be Roisin's turn to play host. Two of her JTEs booked a trip with her to Ireland during a school holiday. Neither one had been abroad before, so it was an eye-opening experience for them to visit the Irish countryside. They went on a sightseeing circuit, stopped in at some Irish pubs, and even tried céilí, a type of Irish dancing. The whole gang stayed at Roisin's family home, so the entire family, as well as their town, was getting what for many of them would be their first interactions with Japanese people. Roisin's family thought the world of their guests. The most mundane elements of daily life for the family were novel and seen from a fresh perspective for the JTEs. They loved how the JTEs were so enthusiastic, constantly showing their genuine appreciation for each experience, big or small. The JTEs certainly wouldn't be the last guests whom Roisin would host in her Irish home, but being the first, they made the biggest impact on the community—talk about grass-roots internationalization!

All throughout her time as a JET, Roisin stayed in touch with the Japanese couple she met in Indonesia. In the age before the ubiquity of the internet and social media, they kept in contact the good old-fashioned way, over the phone and through physical letters. About a year into Roisin's tenure as a JET, they arranged to meet up in Japan. They introduced her to one of their good friends, Yoshi. The two hit it off and ended up dating

Although he didn't say anything to Roisin directly, initially, Yoshi's grandfather strongly opposed their inter-racial relationship. The 80-year-old man wasn't impolite in her presence, per say, but he was a little guarded and terse, no doubt expressing his displeasure with Yoshi in private. All this was unbeknownst to Roisin, however, and she carried on with her usual friendliness, visiting Yoshi's family home frequently, often with fellow JETs in tow. It didn't happen overnight, but Yoshi's grandfather gradually changed his demeanor to one of warmth and familiarity. Roisin and her fellow JETs managed to bridge the generational and cultural gap, creating a profound perspective shift on a very personal level.

Yoshi and Roisin stayed together for a few years, both in Japan and in Ireland after Roisin's term with the program ended. They eventually grew apart and broke up, however, they've stayed in touch all these years. Remarkably, for the last three years in a row, he has visited Guam with his family, always staying in Roisin's home in Merizo.

After the JET Program, Roisin became an interpreter for fishing vessels in Ireland doing work with Japan. Her Japanese may not have been perfect, but as there was a general lack of Japanese speakers in Ireland, she knew more than most! Through the role, she eventually became the first female shipping agent in all of Europe. Years later, her Japanese abilities would open other doors for her, fast tracking her applications for work and permanent residency in New Zealand.

Decades ago, Roisin had no inkling of how her time as a JET would such far-reaching implications for her life and relationships. Her life as a JET would reverberate in so many unexpected directions, but she says ultimately, it was always about the people. It was that interesting couple in Indonesia that brought her to Japan and it was the wonderful people in her city that kept her there.