

Mayumi Sakoh – Tsushima, Nagasaki 2001-2002

As a child, Mayumi made the long journey from Washington D.C. to Japan several times. Her father would take her to visit relatives in his hometown, which was roughly an hour outside of Tokyo. However, she yearned to know more, to find a deeper connection with her Japanese heritage. After graduating from university, the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program provided the perfect opportunity for Mayumi to make her way back to the country, this time to live and work for a year as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT).

While filling out the JET Program application, Mayumi paused at the question asking for her preference in placement. She didn't have a specific prefecture in mind, but she had grown up in cities all her life--Washington D.C. as a child and Montreal for college--so Mayumi thought she would try something different. She asked for somewhere rural and didn't think much else of it, figuring that since Japan is geographically relatively small, any placement would still be accessible and convenient.

What she didn't expect was to be placed in Tsushima, a remote island off the coast of Kyushu, the most southwesterly of Japan's four main islands. Technically part of Nagasaki prefecture, Tsushima rests about halfway between Kyushu and South Korea. It's a touch larger than Guam and can be accessed by plane or ferry. The island boasts an abundance of natural beauty, with nearly 90% of its land covered by a mountain forest.

It was a bit of a shock to be transplanted into rural life. As a foreigner, she was a curiosity on the island, a sort of local celebrity. It was not uncommon for her senior high school students to come to class knowing that she had bought peanut butter and bananas at the local grocery store the day before. Neighbors would comment when she had out-of-town visitors, or even when she received packages in the mail. Compared to the anonymity of cities, it was a change to be noticed so much on the remote island.

The only other foreigner in her town was another ALT working at the local elementary and junior high schools. Tina, who was from Guam, had already been on the island for a year and spoke a fair amount of Japanese. She helped Mayumi settle in to her new home. They became fast friends and spent a lot of time together over their course as JETs. Unbeknownst to Mayumi—and probably most people—Guam and Tsushima are sister islands. The islands have a formal agreement to promote cultural and economic ties. No doubt this relationship played a big part in Tina getting placed in Tsushima.

Although it took some time to get adjusted, living in a rural town definitely had its benefits. Mayumi grew up as an avid cross-country runner, so the stunning mountain views and picturesque beaches provided a perfect backdrop to her long runs. In Japan, although track and field is common in schools, cross-country running is relatively rare. Neighbors and students would, of course, comment that they saw her running around the island. It was especially shocking to the community that she would go on solo runs at night. They were concerned for

her safety, but she always felt comfortable and safe. After all, the whole island seemed to be watching and looking out for her!

As a runner, it was only natural that Mayumi got involved with her school's track and field club. She was quickly dubbed 'assistant coach' and fell right into step with the daily practices and drills. It was fun to interact with the students in a more relaxed setting. In the classroom the students were shy and more focused on their studies than warming to their new teacher. On the track, practicing English was less intimidating and students could joke around and open up about their lives. Eventually this would lead to more enthusiasm and participation in the classroom.

Most of Mayumi's initial communication with her students and community consisted of simplified English, a spattering of Japanese words and gesticulation. Growing up, Mayumi only ever knew rudimentary Japanese words and phrases. When she would visit her father's family in Japan, she could speak to some of her bilingual uncles, but it was difficult to communicate with her cousins who only spoke a few English phrases. Her grandmother spoke no English at all, so their communication was done entirely through gestures. Mayumi's dad had enrolled her in a month-long Japanese class over the summer during one of their trips to Japan, but there were few opportunities to practice after she got back to Washington D.C., so Japanese just never stuck. Now that she was living on this rural island, she was fully immersed in the language. Every day she was forced to practice and work on her Japanese.

By the time she took a trip to visit her father's family over the school spring holidays, her skills had dramatically improved. Her family noticed right away, complementing her ability to speak in full Japanese sentences. It was a blessing to be able to speak to her relatives in their native tongue, and it was during moments like these that Mayumi felt thankful for being placed in Tsushima. Her other ALT friends placed in Fukuoka City had the hustle and bustle of the metropolitan streets, but their Japanese hadn't improved as much because they had access to communities of foreigners and English speakers. The difficulty of living in the sticks had its plus side.

Mayumi also did some traveling on the main island of Kyushu. She drove through remote parts of Kumamoto Prefecture, visiting historical sites that few tourists encounter. This part of Japan was off the beaten path and so different from her experiences in and around Tokyo. In these isolated, picturesque villages, there were no big concrete structures or neon signs. Leisurely strolling down the traditional roads of Kurokawa with the stunning colors of autumn in the backdrop was like being transported back to historic Japan. Donning the light Japanese kimono called *yukata* to take a dip in one natural *onsen*, or hot spring, after another, she felt connected to her heritage in a new way.

After a year with the JET Program, Mayumi headed back to the East coast to attend law school and started working in animal welfare law after graduation. She met her husband-to-be and, in 2016, they got engaged during a trip to Japan. In an interesting twist of fate, a few years later her husband got assigned to a post on Guam. Mayumi hadn't stayed in touch with Tina, her

fellow ALT from Tsushima, but she sent a Facebook message anyway, on the off chance that she was on Guam. Turns out that Tina was indeed teaching at a local school on Guam and she provided a wealth of information to Mayumi for the move. After they arrived in 2018, Tina and Mayumi picked up where they left off over 15 years prior. Tina showed Mayumi and her family great hospitality and her kindness proved to be a real lifeline on the island. Neither can believe they've reunited so many years later, living on a small island together once again.

Since moving to Guam, Mayumi and her family have already been to Japan three times. They've taken trips with their young daughter to visit Mayumi's father and, of course, stopped by Tokyo Disney. Currently pregnant with her second child, Mayumi speaks of visiting Tsushima once her children are older, perhaps as a reunion trip along with Tina and her family. Half a world away from where she grew up, Mayumi is once again living somewhere more rural than she's used to, but she's taking advantage of the opportunity, ensuring that her children, too, will have a chance to forge a deep connection with their Japanese heritage.