

## India Sekiguchi – Gunma Prefecture, 2003-2004

India had grown up exposed to Japanese culture. As a young kid on Guam, she would attend the *akimatsuri*, or Autumn Festival, every year with her family. She interacted with tourists visiting the island and her family made several trips to Japan while India was growing up. Even after her family relocated to Australia when she was nine years old, India maintained her interest in Japanese culture and language. Throughout high school and college she studied Japanese, and earned a Bachelor of Arts with Japanese and Chinese majors. With her strong language skills and strong familiarity with Japanese culture, it was a natural next step for her to become an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) with the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program.

Assigned to Maebashi, the capital city of Gunma, India found herself in an urban zone with over a million people. To get around, she bought a car, but also opted to get a bike for short trips in the area. She wasn't much of a biker, but the Japanese *mamachari* bikes seemed to be ubiquitous--used by everyone in the city from middle school kids and office ladies to businessmen and *obaachans* (grandmothers)--so she figured she would be fine. With their characteristic basket set in front of the handlebars, they're simply made bikes, but are an indispensable way to traverse Japanese cities.

With her new, bright yellow *mamachari*, India started to get comfortable navigating the city streets. She got better at holding an umbrella over her head when the weather took a turn for the worse. Balancing multiple shopping bags hanging off of her handlebars started to get easier. She relished in bypassing gridlock traffic on her way to work at her elementary and middle schools. Her legs grew stronger, and she gained more confidence with every ride.

Soon, she started taking longer trips that were less driven by practicality. India enjoyed being out in nature and often took solo rides for several hours along Tone River, Japan's second longest river. Some rides would be an adventure, with no particular destination in mind. She would just explore until she got hungry, and then find a rural mom-and-pop style restaurant to stop into. With her excellent Japanese skills, she was able to make friends with the rural, usually much older, residents, who lived and worked along the river.

Bicycling became her preferred mode of transportation. When friends would take a 30-minute train ride to visit a nearby town, she'd take her bike and meet them there. Even during the winter snowfall, India would be seen bundled up and pedaling to work. Riding along rice paddies felt free to India, it was her time to connect with nature, with nothing but her legs to propel her forward. She hadn't expected to take such a liking to riding bikes, but she felt a strong connection to this new, liberating form of movement—practical, athletic and exploratory.

As her contract with the JET Program came to a close, India took a cultural liaison role with an International Association in Kagawa Prefecture, a small, rural area located on Shikoku, the smallest of the four main islands that make up Japan. Although she enjoyed her time in Maebashi, India wanted to improve her language skills and felt that living in a place with very few foreigners would be her best bet at rapid improvement.

Before the start of her new position, India decided to take part in an annual event called Bicycle for Everyone's Earth, or BEE Japan. Founded in 1997, various riders would complete an epic journey that spanned the length of the country, starting at the very northern tip of Hokkaido in Wakkanai and ending in the southern end of Kyushu, in Kagoshima. Some riders

stayed for the duration, while others joined in through certain sections. More than just a physical feat, BEE Japan had strong principles that advocated supporting small businesses, eating seasonal, local food whenever possible, minimizing waste and avoiding chain stores and convenience stores—that included the use of vending machines. Riders camped throughout the journey and packed camping stoves so that they could cook the local produce they purchased at small coops and local stores. As a group, they would carry out educational activities in preplanned school stops along the way. They conducted English discussion circles and met with local communities to increase awareness and facilitate discussions about bio-interconnectivity, forest destruction, over consumption and renewable energy sources.

For this caliber of a trip, India had to trade in her *mamachari* for something a bit more rugged and durable, specifically outfitted to carry all of her supplies for the long journey. They avoided the big roads, opting for local routes. It was physically challenging, on average covering a hundred miles a day. India still recalls how seemingly endless the mountains felt as they traversed the Japanese Alps, a series of mountain ranges that bisect the main island of Honshu. It was tough going, but thanks to the daily bike rides in Maebashi, she had the strength, endurance and confidence to take it on.

Despite the challenges, India thinks back fondly of her time on the road. With their emphasis on local produce and their route taking them through smaller towns, it was rare that they would ever see another tourist. They got to meet a lot of local people and see parts of Japan that few others, foreign or Japanese, have ever seen. With long, quiet rides, there was time to take in the stunning countryside, reflect and commune with nature.

Having started as one of the original four riders in Wakkanai, Hokkaido, India made the journey about halfway down the length of Honshu to the capital city of Tokyo. Her new contract was starting, so she said her goodbyes, and thankfully was allowed to keep her road bicycle to take with her for explorations in rural Kagawa.

India's new job comprised of coordinating international events and activities for the town as well as some English instruction for youth and adults. During her tenure, she even took a group of Japanese adults down to Australia to tour them around Sydney and Uluru. Just as she had hoped, her Japanese skills improved thanks to full Japanese immersion in the rural town. India hadn't intended to leave Japan at the end of her contract in Kagawa, but her parents had decided to move back to Guam from Australia. India didn't plan to join her parents on their relocation to Guam, so she needed to go back to move her things out and get herself settled in Sydney.

Before she left Japan for good, she signed up for a month-long Japanese language intensive course in Okayama. India had already passed the N2 level of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), but wanted to try for N1, the highest level. To India's dismay, the other students taking the course were a lot younger and most were not up to the level of India's Japanese ability. The N1 level of the JLPT required an understanding of 2,000 *kanji*, or Chinese characters, and around 10,000 vocabulary words, so she wanted to practice as much as possible. She eventually found a website that connected pen pals in Okayama and wrote a post looking for someone to converse with in the area as way to practice her Japanese and to make friends who would be closer to her age.

A short while later, she received a message from Kentaro, who was bilingual and interested in meeting up. India already had a boyfriend back in Australia at the time, so when she

wrote back, she made it clear that this would just be a platonic meet up and conversation practice. Thus far, she had only met up with girls through the website, and she didn't want him to get the wrong idea.

It turned out that Kentaro was living in Florida and had just been visiting his family in Okayama for the summer. They got along well and they planned to meet up again. It didn't take too much time to realize that their connection had more than Japanese and English practice going for it! After a whirlwind courtship, just five weeks after they met, India and Kentaro got engaged. Despite the obvious distraction, India still managed to pass the N1 proficiency test!

After a few months back in Australia, India moved to be with Kentaro in Florida. She had never lived in the continental United States, and, unfortunately, wasn't so thrilled living there. So when India and Kentaro visited her parents on Guam over the Christmas holidays and they both liked it—bonus that it was so much closer to Japan-- they decided to move back to Guam. Since their move to the island in 2007, they started The Island King Imports, a wholesale company, and grew it into a successful business. Their original brand 'GUAM1 BEER' brews and iconic shirts are sold all over the island.

India and Kentaro now have four children and still visit Japan several times a year. On their most recent family trip to Kyoto, they rented bikes to ride along the beautiful Kamo River. Her two oldest children, Sakura and Takahiro, had their own little bikes. India, as the experienced rider of the family, had her 4-year-old, Kaede, in a child seat on the back and her 1-year-old, Iris, in an infant seat on the front. With a little more caution, but just as much joy, India once again pedaled her way around a Japanese city.