

John Quito – ALT, Gunma-Ken, Kiryu-Shi, 2010-2012

The first time that John and his fellow Assistant Language Teacher visited an onsen, they had two golden rules: keep your hands strategically placed and keep your eyes straight ahead.

For the uninitiated, Japanese onsens are public baths, hot springs that are peppered throughout the nation thanks to the volcanic activity of the country. Onsens have been a central element in Japanese society for centuries, not only as a means to cleans and purify the body, but also to serve as centers within communities.

John didn't know what to expect when he first found out that he was heading to Kiryu-shi, a small city in Gunma Prefecture, about 60 miles northwest of Tokyo. What he did know was that he would be teaching English as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) at a middle school and two elementary schools.

His transition from Guam to Kiryu-shi was softened by the fact that his city in Japan had a similarly-sized population that had a relaxed, open feel to it. John describes his city as a 'mountainous Guam'. The mountains also meant that onsens were in no short supply.

By the time John took his third visit to an onsen, he was hooked. What once felt awkward and strange—cleansing yourself before going in naked to hot springs with strangers—felt instead relaxing and natural. His trips to hot springs quickly became a regular part of his weekly schedule.

After work, it'd be commonplace for John to call his friends and take 15-20 minute ride to one of the neighboring onsens. They could relax and unwind, talking for hours while immersed in hot baths and all the while forging strong friendships.

Weekends would be even more extravagant, frequently consisting of 'onsen hopping' road trips when he and his closest ALT friends, Vincent and Stephanny, and their two Japanese female friends, M-Chan and S-Chan, would take longer trips to outlying villages to discover new hot spots. Onsens are typically segregated by gender so the pairs would split up upon arrival. Once they had their fill of their first onsen, they'd get dressed, rejoin the group, hop in the car, and head to the next onsen on their route!

Onsen towns provided a particular allure to the group as weekend getaways. For the full experience, they would book rooms in ryokans, Japanese-style inns that often embody the picturesque image of traditional living quarters, complete with tatami floors and futons. Once they had checked in, they completed the transition into full 'relaxation mode' by putting on a casual type of kimono called a yukata and start exploring all the onsens on offer! Instead of driving a car in between dips, they simply walked from one onsen spot to another within the village--not even needing to get fully dressed between baths thanks to their comfortable yukata! Imagine strolling down a winding Japanese road in a small town dressed

in the fall, with the leaves changing color and the sounds of a babbling brook nearby—easy to imagine yourself transported back to ancient Japan!

It was on one such trip to one of Japan's most famous onsen towns—Kusatsu—that John recalls quite vividly. The water in Kusatsu is particularly sulfurous and acidic, earning it the nickname of 'hot spring of beauty' as the minerals in the water are fabled to bring about smooth and moisturized skin. John's love for onsen exceeded the recommended bath time of 30 minutes twice a day. Instead, he stayed for two hours straight the first night and come back for another 40 minute dip the following day. John left Kusatsu feeling revitalized, but what he had not counted on was that his extended soaks in water with high sulfur also came with the consequence of smelling like rotting eggs for a week! They drove home with the windows down, but John still gets teased about it to this day.

John's favorite onsen memory took place in the heart of winter at Shiriyaki Onsen. Shiriyaki is unique because the 'onsen' consists of an entire river. Different to most onsens in Japan, bathing suits are allowed, one can bring in food and—as it's literally a river in small village—it's completely free! Because of the bathing suits, John was able to do his favorite thing—sit in an onsen for hours—while hanging out with his entire close circle of friends, including M-Chan and S-Chan.

En route to the tiny village of Kuni, where Shiriyaki Onsen winds down amidst mountains, John and his friends loaded up on snacks and beverages. They sat in the steaming river, surrounded by mountains on all sides. A soft layer of snow blanketed the edges of the water, adding to the pristine feel of being completely surrounded by nature. They ended up staying for six hours, long enough for day to turn into night. And as the sun went down, it was not the streetlights that illuminated them (for there were none around in this tiny town). Instead, they relaxed under the perfect, magnificent stars that came out to greet them.

Six years later, John still makes it a point to stop by hot springs when he visits Japan. However, his short trips pale in comparison to the experiences he had during his two years as an ALT. Embedded in the mountainous landscape of Gunma, with his closest friends in tow, he was free to explore and travel, to slow down and soak in all of the subtleties that each spot had to offer, and to experience the pure joy of being so deeply connected with nature.