Latest Kagoshima News

Ishin Mirai Haku

Coordinator for International Relations (CIR) Column

Tōtuganashi (thank you) – A Trip to Yoron Island in Pursuit of Peace  by Seo Heekyung (CIR from South Korea)

Kagoshima International Exchange A-Z

Vietnamese New Year (Tet) Festa

Prefectural government-funded foreign students and overseas technical trainees’ completion ceremony and debriefing session

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Ishin Mirai Haku

The Ishin Mirai Haku (Meiji Restoration and Future Expo), an event that was a culmination of activities held in the milestone 150th anniversary of the Meiji Restoration, was held at Kagoshima Prefectural Citizens Exchange Center.

Besides seminars and talk shows on stage, diverse events included various exhibitions, a quiz corner, and food stalls.

About 10,000 people came or joined in the activities that were a result of the commemorative year’s programmes. We believe these activities provided opportunities for visitors to learn about the history of their birthplace and for the next generation to inherit the strong will of their forebears.

Moving forward towards the 200th anniversary of the Meiji Restoration, we hope our children who will define the destiny of Kagoshima would stride into the future with pride in their hometown and hope and ambitions in their hearts.
The happiest thing that comes from writing for this email newsletter is that I can visit somewhere I have never been to at the end of my stint. It is a very generous perk, and when my turn finally came I requested to go to Yoron Island without a moment of hesitation. You may wonder, why Yoron Island? It is a place that I have always wanted to go to even before I came to Kagoshima. Yoron Island is somewhat well known even in South Korea because of a movie called *Megane* (“Glasses”), and I was one of those people who after watching the movie wanted to go ‘twilight’ at that same beach. And thus, I visited Yoron Island on a 3-day 2-night trip from the 16th of January. This rather long article is about what I saw and experienced during my stay, and I would be most glad if you could stay with me till the end.

As it would be my first time boarding a Japan Air Commuter (JAC) propeller plane, visiting an island other than Yakushima Island, and seeing sugar cane plants and emerald green seas, once it was decided that I would go on the information-gathering trip I was in such high spirits and impatient for the day to come that I was distracted at work. Unfortunately, life doesn’t always go according to plan. After enduring a 2 hour delay, I finally arrived at a rainy Yoron Island. As I retrieved my umbrella from my bag, I recalled my objective of writing a piece on the theme of ‘slow life’ on laidback Yoron Island where time passes slowly, and felt a shiver run down my spine.

The rain had blurred my vision, and I wiped my wet glasses with a cloth while waiting for my suitcase by a short conveyor belt. It was a rather surreal sight. I collected my suitcase and met with Mr Ichiki from Yoron Town Hall and prefectural official Mr Sonoda. Mr Ichiki especially attended to me for two whole days despite his busy schedule, and I am very grateful for his kindness. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all the officials and other people I met who treated me kindly.

Back to my story. The officials wished me a pleasant trip, weather notwithstanding, and Mr Ichiki and I left the airport on a tour of the island’s natural environment, culture and history. After a light lunch of mozuku soba (buckwheat noodles with seaweed), we headed to Southern Cross Center and viewed the exhibits introducing the history, sights and specialty products of the 5 Amami Islands including Yoron Island. I found out that Yoron is an uplifted coral island, and thus the white beaches and rocks are in fact fragments of coral. I also learned about the island’s traditional way of paying respects to one’s ancestors, and saw adorable Yoron Marathon medals made by the public and the awe-inspiring costumes of the Yoron Jugoya Dance¹ (an event that I had wanted to but was unable to see for the past few years due to work). Seeing is believing; to some extent I got the gist of Yoron Island through listening to explanations and viewing the artefacts. Southern Cross Center also had on display the bicycle that Sakura let Taeko (the heroine of *Megane*) ride pillion. I was too embarrassed and declined to ride on the bicycle, but now I regret not sitting on it at least once.
We next headed to the sea. Bemoaning the rain that didn’t want to ease off, we then went to Kotohira Shrine and a castle ruins. I felt bad as they are right beside Southern Cross Center and we ended up going in a roundabout way due to my insufficient research. The rain only got stronger, and I prayed for fine weather on the next day before following the priest Mr Oki on a tour of the shrine grounds and listening to tales of Yoron Castle.

I knew that “Ryukyu” refers to the kingdom of what is now Okinawa, but I discovered for the first time that there was a “Three Kingdoms Period” referring to a time when the kingdoms of Hokuzan, Chuzan and Nanzan existed before they were later unified to form the Ryukyu Kingdom. Yoron Castle on Yoron Island, which was part of the kingdom of Hokuzan, was built between 1405 and 1416 by Oshan, the third son of the Hokuzan king. However, the kingdom fell and construction stopped midway. If you use your imagination, you can probably see that the stone structure, which was built in the shape of a sleeping dragon, echoes the form of a hazy Okinawa/Ryukyu that you might or might not be able to see. It gave me a sense of the strong ties between Okinawa and Yoron Island. Belatedly, I wanted to kick myself for forgetting to bring my goshuincho (a book for collecting shrine seals and calligraphy) to this once-in-a-lifetime place. I should have packed my bags carefully a few days in advance, not do it hastily before departure.

Later, I returned to my hotel to deposit my luggage before heading out to dinner. The officials of Commerce, Industry and Tourism Division at Yoron Town Hall including Director Yamashita were there, and I had a truly enjoyable meal. They were all so lovely; knowing that it was my first time to the island they ordered traditional dishes and explained everything to me oh so patiently. Just when I was greatly moved by their friendliness, the Yoron Kenpo – that I had been warned of countless times before I departed on this trip – began. Yoron Kenpo is a traditional drinking ritual of Yoron Island in which the master of the ceremony would make a speech and down a cup of alcohol, before offering a toast to each and every one of his/her guests in turn. The guests would also say a few words before drinking and returning the emptied cup. The dynamic way in which alcohol is consumed exceeded expectations, but what struck me even more was the rule that everyone should listen in silence as the recipient of the cup makes his/her comments. As someone who is usually talkative, I was enthralled by this ritual and had such a marvellous time I forgot about my daily grind. It was such great fun.

Unsurprisingly, it was raining on the morning of the second day. We therefore decided to take our time exploring the island while battling the curious phenomenon of heavier rains whenever we wanted to go outdoors. Through the car window, I looked at the tranquil scenes of harvested sugar canes lying above red soil, of Taiwan cherry blossoms about to burst into bloom, of goats chewing on grass without a care in the world, and felt myself becoming just a little kinder.

We stopped by Yui-no-oka hill, where one could see the Yurigahama Beach which is one of Amami’s top 10 sights, and the world’s smallest Lake Hato before boarding a glass-bottom boat to Oganeku Coast. The sea was so rough even a non-expert like me could tell, and I got a little worried, but I couldn’t back out after saying I could handle it. The boat set off. It was thrilling like a roller coaster ride the first 5 minutes, but after 10, 20 minutes of rocking, I started to feel ill and could only gaze into the distance to alleviate the seasickness. Nonetheless, I don’t regret my decision. The sea that I had looked forward to was so stunning words fail to describe it, and I could also see Yurigahama Beach, coral reefs and even turtles.
After battling the waves for an hour, we were soaked to the bone and shivering uncontrollably. We had an early lunch at restaurant Tara in Yorontou Village hotel. One could see the passage of time in the hotel, but the film sets for the dining area and Taeko’s room in Hamada guesthouse in *Megane* were left untouched, and it felt as if the movie characters would casually appear with a “good morning”.

After my stomach and heart were satiated, we visited Yunnu Taikenkan to experience playing the sanshin stringed instrument. We could choose between making gel candles and playing the sanshin while singing shima-uta folk songs, but the sanshin was the only option for someone not artistically inclined. As it was something that I had wanted to learn one day, I was glad for the opportunity to experience it. The workshop lasted under an hour. I did not know any Japanese nursery songs, so I practised with a shima-uta folk song instead. With the teacher’s compliments that I learn fast and can potentially do more, by the end of the session I was somewhat able to strum a rendition of “Satugaadiku” in a duet with the teacher. It had been a long time since I last touched a musical instrument, and I recalled crying while attending piano lessons. I don’t remember why they were so unbearable, but it might be because I was never praised by the teacher. I improve better with praises. In fact, as I believe this is some kind of fate, I hope to start learning the instrument after things have settled down. If you are familiar with the sanshin instrument, please teach me how to play it.

We then went to Pajipikipanta (a hill which was the setting for a local myth) and Yoron Station for pictures before going to Akasaki Limestone Cave. It was a mysterious environment formed over a span of time so long it was unfathomable. While it isn’t well-maintained like a tourist facility, the cave that was discovered by a Japanese university’s exploration club was perfect as limestone caves were a new thing to me.

Our next stop was Yoron Folk Village, and I learned about the traditional lifestyles, customs and culture of the island. Everyone, even the village chief, were friendly, and while sipping tea at the resting spot our conversation became livelier and livelier and I found myself chatting to the village chief about travelling in South Korea. Of course, I remembered him saying “I appeared in a drama²”, and I watched the show carefully after I went back home. Even though we had met only once, seeing him on TV invoked a sense of familiarity. I wonder why.

Another thing that left a mark on me was seeing notebooks wherever I go on the island. They seem to be evidence of the homey atmosphere and the importance of relationships and ties to the islanders. I couldn’t help but leave my comments in some of the books. They’re written in Korean, so you should be able to find them quite easily.

The skies finally cleared on the third day, and Ms Takeshita from the Tourism Division brought me on a tour of *Megane*’s film locations including Tumai Beach. However, as it has been 10 years since the movie aired, considerable effort and patience was needed to find the exact locations. Due to the slightly delayed return flight, and Ms Takeshita bringing me around places right till the end, I was able to see more of Yoron Island than I ever could if I came alone. I am really thankful for her generosity.

It has been a week since then, and writing this column now it feels like a wonderful dream. I am now finally able to reward the me who was drained from juggling college and part-time work 9 years ago. When
I was on the island I was in a terribly melancholic mood, but I’m not sure if you can call it ‘twilighting’. What I am certain of though, is that these memories will serve as a mental refuge for the remaining three months of my stint as Coordinator for International Relations.

This is my final piece, and I hope you have enjoyed it. Thank you for your readership these four years, and I hope to see you again someday. Bye!

1 The Yoron Jugoya Dance, an important intangible folk cultural property designated by both Yoron Town and Japan, is a performance dedicated to the gods to pray for the peace of the island and a good harvest and held on the full moon of the 3rd, 8th, and 10th months of the lunar calendar.

2 Yoron Island Japan in 8K HDR – Yoron: https://youtu.be/5MnVakBk850

Drama Re:island: https://www.qab.co.jp/reisland/

Do check them out before you visit Yoron Island!

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Kagoshima International Exchange A-Z

Vietnamese New Year (Tet) Festa

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The Vietnamese New Year (Tet) Festa was held on 10 February for technical interns, international students and other Vietnamese people living in Kagoshima to celebrate and enjoy the Vietnamese New Year. Vietnamese comprise the largest group of foreign residents by nationality residing in Kagoshima, and the event was a part of initiatives to promote the coexistence of Japanese and foreign residents in communities here.

This event was co-hosted by Kagoshima Prefecture, Japan-Vietnam Friendship Association in Kagoshima, and Kagoshima International Exchange Foundation, and was graced with the presence of Vietnamese Ambassador to Japan His Excellency Mr Vu Hong Nam.

At the address by the organisers Governor Mitazono told the attendees, “Kagoshima cannot exist without the support of all of you foreign residents. We will continue to warmly welcome all of you, so please consult with us if you have any issues.”

Attendees greatly enjoyed the Vietnamese food, dance and music at the event.
The completion ceremony and debriefing session for overseas technical trainees and prefectural government-funded foreign students was held on 13 February at the Kagoshima Prefectural Government office building. The 3 overseas technical trainees arrived in September last year and underwent training at Kagoshima Asia-Pacific Intercultural Countryside Center in Kanoya City and their respective institutions in Kagoshima City, while the 3 international students came in April last year and studied at Kagoshima University.

The trainees and students received their certificates of completion and commemorative gifts from Vice-Governor Iwakiri, and reported on their training/research as well as their memorable experiences of life in Kagoshima at the debriefing session that followed.

Ms Astrid Geraldine Kuroki, an overseas technical trainee from Brazil who trained at the Faculty of Agriculture at Kagoshima University said, “I am grateful for this experience. I was blessed with wonderful teachers, and I learnt many things including Japanese kanji characters.”

In response, her supervisor Vice-Dean Prof. Fumio Hashimoto gave her words of encouragement, “I hope you could put to use what you have learnt in Japan and do your best back home.”

Kagoshima Prefecture has welcomed 240 overseas technical trainees from 27 countries since 1981, and funded 136 international students from 3 countries since 1970.
A Note from the Editors (Kagoshima Prefecture International Affairs Division)
What did you think of this month’s “Kagoshima Southern Wind Tidings”? The editors will continue to strive to make this prefectural foreign language newsletter a source of information and a bridge to connect all of you to Kagoshima. We’d like to ask our readers to provide their opinions, suggestions, article contributions and Kagoshima-related news.

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