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CREDITS:
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Wide Island Update

Happy New Year! Welcome to the first 2008 edition of Wide Island View! We hope everyone had a great vacation and that the next one doesn't seem too far away! In this issue you'll find tons of recipes, information about our neighboring ken, Okayama, a review of a very unique

Onomichi festival and AJET news among other things. We hope you enjoy this issue of Wide Island View and don't hesitate to write to us at wideislandview@gmail.com if you have any comments, suggestions or ideas for future articles. Thanks, and see you at the mid-year conference!

Happy Reading!

MATT and JEN



Nabe: hot, nutritious, delicious (photo by Jen Thwaites)

NABE ❄️

Warming up winter in Japan

by JEN THWAITES

Your students are shivering their way through lessons, you don't dare brave school without plastering kairo all over your body and now you don't even have the thought of an impending Christmas escape to somewhere hot to cheer you up. It's definitely February in Japan. Japan goes some way to making up for its

lack of central heating with numerous winter wonders: heated carpets, the *ko-tatsu*, *onsen* and those little blankets that people cart around to work, libraries, cafes, etc., to name but a few. For me, however, the absolute best thing about winter in Japan has to be the obsession with *nabemono*: literally "cooking pot" + "things/stuff", and more commonly called simply *nabe*, which will quickly and easily warm the cockles of your heart and leave you feeling much more positive about life.

The term *nabe* refers to all kinds of

Japanese steamboat and one-pot (clay or cast thick iron) dishes, which are usually soups and stews, and are commonly eaten in winter. It is generally eaten as a shared dish with diners dipping into the communal pot which is heated by a table-top stove. *Nabe* can be lightly flavoured with *kombu* seaweed, and served with various dipping sauces, or strongly flavoured with miso, soy sauce and *dashi*, and eaten as it is. My own approach to *nabe* is rather haphazard: go to supermarket starving hungry, throw random assortment of veggies, meat and tofu into trolley, run home, chop on washing machine lid (small apartment), chuck everything into *nabe* pot along with contents of broth sachet, cook and devour. However, a little digging around on the internet uncovers a plethora of *nabe* varieties to choose from, and given that it's easy, healthy (well, apart from the sesame dip!), excellent for communal dining, and cheap (if you can find a few friends to share the cost), there's no excuse not to give *nabe* a go at home. So, here are a few *nabe* ideas to get your mouth watering:

1. *Chankonabe*: this dish was originally served only to sumo wrestlers to help them gain weight and, as such, it is typically made with more ingredients than other types of *nabe*. It involves chicken, daikon radish, tofu, carrots, aubergine, leeks, shitake mushrooms,

meatballs and udon cooked in a broth made from boiling chicken bones with water, soy sauce, salt and sake for a few hours. Alternatively, you can pick up a sachet from your local supermarket! Don't worry: *chankonabe* has no magical weight-gain-inducing properties. You'll have to eat it in sumo-wrestler quantities to develop the same physique! This dish is always made with chicken rather than beef because cows keep all four limbs on the ground just as a defeated sumo-wrestler does, and are therefore considered unlucky. And don't use fish-based *dashi* stock for the broth either: sumo wrestlers need their arms and legs, and limbless fish are also unlucky.

2. *Sukiyaki*: thinly-sliced meat, tofu, vegetables and *shirataki* (*konnyaku* noodles). The ingredients are stewed in sweetened soy and eaten with a raw egg dip.

3. *Oden*: boiled eggs, daikon radish, fish cakes, *konnyaku* and *kombu* seaweed boiled over many hours in a light, soy-flavoured *dashi* stock. Other ingredients include octopus, *surimi* and, in Okinawa, pig trotters!

4. *Motsunabe*: made with beef or pork offal in a soy sauce or miso-based soup. It became popular nationwide in the 1990s because of its reasonable price and good taste, after originating in

Fukuoka. It is usual to boil the offal with garlic, chives and cabbage. Then *champon* noodles (a type of ramen) are cooked in the remaining liquid.

5. *Shabu shabu*: Japanese style meat fondue. Thinly-sliced meat, vegetables and tofu are dipped into a hot soup and then into a *ponzu* or sesame sauce before being eaten.

If you aren't taken with any of the above, you can always try *yosenabe*: putting anything you fancy in a miso or soy-based broth. Or, for a spicier dish, pick up a sachet of *kimuchi nabe* broth and some *kimuchi* from the supermarket. Hiroshima is famous for oyster *nabe*, and you will find oyster-flavoured broth locally. Or check out other areas' *nabe* specialties, such as *ishikari-nabe* (salmon stewed in miso-broth with vegetables) in Hokkaido.

Finally, my top tip: if you're making *kimuchi nabe* and you have broth left when all the meat and veggies have been eaten, pour in a beaten egg for each diner and add cooked rice. Let the egg cook and serve for a delicious, filling end to a wonderful *nabe* meal.

So go out and get a *nabe* pot and beat the Japan winter blues! [S](#)

Check out about.com for nabe recipes.

EVENT IN REVIEW:

Ethan Kate shares his experience of Betcha Matsuri, a festival occurring on November 3rd in Onomichi, Hiroshima Prefecture.

Betcha Matsuri by ETHAN KATE

Some fifteen years ago, when watching *Jurassic Park*, (anyone else suddenly feel old after that statement?) a standard was set to which all other children's terrified faces could be compared. As the T-Rex approached the overturned car of children Lex and Tim, no look could more appropriately convey "this is the end of it all" than young Lex's. That is, of course, until I went to the Betcha Matsuri in Onomichi on November 3rd.



Betcha Matsuri: traumatizing babies for fun and profit (photo by Ethan Kate)

At this festival, commemorating the end of a period of infectious disease after the Edo era, three demons and one monster, dubbed by my Japanese tutor: “the envoy of god,” stroll the city hitting and pushing everyone in their way, thus ensuring health, cleverness and a bevy of other good tidings for the coming year. What really makes this festival special, however, is the dichotomy between parents and children, especially the young ones. Parents, as you might expect, bring their children to be hit or maimed by these monsters and demons, causing all different sorts of reactions.

While parents eagerly brought their chil-

dren close to the beasts, there were more or less four possible reactions. First, most of the older children were quite brave, even joking around with the monsters. These bold children, however, were divided into two groups—those who actually were brave, and those who only pretended to be, quickly scampering away once they got too close. Then, there were the infants, who had no cognizance as to their surroundings, but certainly cried as soon as they were hit on the head. For those children in the toddler and slightly older range, there were two main reactions, either pure shock and awe or pure terror (my personal favorite and the most frequent sighting).

Those in awe were too dumbfounded to react, and just let the beating happen—and, yes, they were hit quite hard—while those who were terrified either screamed and held tightly clutched their parents, or otherwise kicked, squirmed, and did anything else possible to flee. Through all of this commotion, parents, grandparents, and spectators alike were laughing at the misfortunes of these small children.

Clearly, this festival falls into one of those “Only in Japan” moments that have certainly become frequent occurrences for all of us, and is something that shouldn’t be missed. §

RECIPE:

SUPER VEGGIE LASAGANA

by JULIA MAYEDA

INGREDIENTS:

- lasagna noodles
- 1000 grams of your favorite pasta sauce
- 2 small yellow onions, chopped
- 4 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 2 bags of spinach (about 6 bunches), chopped
- 1 red pepper, chopped
- 1 yellow pepper, chopped
- 12 button mushrooms, chopped
- 4 tbs olive oil
- salt and pepper
- 1 tsp oregano
- a pinch of rosemary
- 200 grams mozzarella cheese, sliced
- 200 grams cottage cheese
- 300 grams shredded cheese
- 50 grams parmesan

DIRECTIONS:

- Preheat oven to 180 degrees Celsius
- Prepare lasagna noodles as directed on the box; remember they should be undercooked because they will finish cooking in the oven.
- Using 1-2 TBS olive oil, saute the spinach with 1 clove of garlic; unless you have a gigantic pan you will have to break it up into 2 to 4 rounds. Remember that it doesn’t take very long to cook spinach, maybe 1 to 2 minutes.
- Using the rest of the oil, saute the other veggies and garlic.
- Combine veggies, spinach, cottage cheese, oregano and rosemary and



season with salt and pepper.

- In a large baking dish, coat the bottom with a layer of sauce and lasagna noodles.
- Add a layer of veggie mix and cheeses and cover with another layer of noodles and sauce.
- Continue until you use all the ingredients or run out of room. I usually get 4 layers packed with goodies.
- The top of the lasagna should be covered with sauce and cheese.
- Cover with tin foil and bake until thoroughly heated, about 25 minutes, then uncover and bake until the cheese is melted.

NOTES:

- Feel free to substitute or add more of your favorite veggies!
- If you’re not feeding six people, this is a great meal to make on a Sunday and then eat it all week or freeze for later.
- **Prep Time:** 1 hour
- **Feeds:** 4 hungry people

COCKTAIL:

KALIMOTXO (CALIMOCHO)

by MICHAEL HALUALANI

INGREDIENTS:

- red wine
- cola

EXPLANATION:

An interesting mixture commonly quaffed throughout the bars of Spain and several other European locales, *kalimotxo*, which comes from the Basque language, is made easily enough by mixing red wine with some sort of Cola. Any red wine will do, although in this case cheaper is better.

A standard mix is half wine and half cola, but I prefer about 2/3 wine to 1/3 cola. Obviously the measurements can be changed to fit your personal preference. I find it best when drunk out of a tall glass filled with ice. Some people might cringe at the thought of drinking ice cold red wine, which happens all too often here in Japan! However, give it a try and I’m sure you’ll enjoy this light and flavorful drink. If you are looking to add a little extra flavor you can top it off with a splash of grenadine or blackberry liqueur.

To score extra style points, garnish the glass with a cherry or an orange slice.

かんぱい!

“JAPANESE FILM”

“As I learned more about Japan... I began to realize something unexpected: the object of my affection was neither pure nor perfect. She had a dark side, a seedy underbelly...”

FILM♥LUST by ALEXIS FRANKS

When I think back on what drew me to Japanese studies, I can't help but chuckle. It was a scene from Natsume Souseki's *Kokoro*, a novel about a young man who befriends an aged teacher known only as "Sensei." This scene contains all the quietude and pathos that novice Japanophiles crave: a pair of run-down teahouses on a rocky stretch of beach; gulls shrieking over the calm black sea; a lonely old man at the water's edge, rinsing salt from his bathing costume and humming a Japanese folk song under his breath. *This is what I want*, I thought. *Give me more of this.*

As I learned more about Japan, the country that I had fallen so hard for, though, I began to realize something unexpected: the object of my affection was neither pure nor perfect. She had a dark side, a seedy underbelly. And, in time, her vices became more fascinating, more lovable, than her virtues.

The filmmaker Juzo Itami (1933-1997) made it his life's work to explore these vices of his mother country, to turn the classic image of a timeless, *wa*-drenched Japan on its head. During his time as an actor, Itami gained enormous popularity for his portrayal of a childish, workaholic father in Yoshimitsu Morita's subversive take on the Japanese education and family systems, *The Family Game* (*Kazoku Ge-mu*, 1983). It is difficult to erase the image of Itami, as the clueless head of the Numata clan, pouting to his exhausted wife that his morning eggs "aren't runny enough," that he can't bring the plate to his mouth and noisily suck them up. "I *like* doing that," he moans.

Itami's first foray as a director, *The Funeral* (*Ososhiki*, 1984), won him

international acclaim. A satire, *The Funeral* relates the pathetically funny attempts of a "modern" Japanese family to put together a traditional funeral service for their deceased grandfather. When they congregate in the room where the service will take place, no one knows how to address the priest or to sit properly – an uncle lists and finally tumbles to the side as his leg falls asleep. When they try to practice the Buddhist chanting that will feature heavily in the service, the daughter of the dead man can't find her husband, who must lead the ritual, because he's busy ravishing his secretary in the bushes just beyond the house.

The money that Itami earned from *The Funeral* enabled him to finance his next three features: *Dandelion* (*Tampopo*, 1985); *A Taxing Woman* (*Marusa no onna*, 1988); and *A Taxing Woman's Return* (*Marusa no Onna II*, 1989). In the first, Itami explores the Japanese fascination with food and the ecstatic, almost orgasmic pleasure that Japanese people get from eating. *Dandelion* works as a series of vignettes. It follows, by turns, the story of a young woman who gets pointers on making the perfect ramen dish from a truck-driving stranger; the frustrations faced by an etiquette teacher trying to show her middle-aged female students "the proper European way" to eat spaghetti, which involves no slurping, no sucking, and no draining of bowls; and the comings and goings of a young couple who rent a room in a love hotel during their lunch hour each day, cracking egg after egg and transferring the yolks back and forth between their mouths as a form of foreplay.

A Taxing Woman and *A Taxing Woman's Return* both star Nobuko Miyamoto, Itami's real-life wife. Not pretty in any conventional sense, Miyamoto is known for portraying characters admired more for their pluck than their physical attributes. She is the "taxing woman" of the titles of these films, a high-level inspector for the Japanese Tax Bureau, which, at the time the films were made, was authorized to confiscate up to 80% of

FILMS OF HIROSHIMA

If you'd like to know more about Juzo Itami, there is a museum in Matsuyama. For more information, please check out the website at <http://itami-kinenkan.jp/>.

Hiroshima-ken has a rich film history as well. Here is just a sampling of the many fine films with a connection to the *ken*.

• Tokyo Story

Filmed in Onomichi, this 1953 classic was directed by Ozu Yasujiro and tells the story of an elderly couple who travel to Tokyo to visit their children, who are busy with their own hectic lives and consequently do not make time for their parents. The film is frequently cited as one of the top ten greatest films of all time.

• Yamato (Otoko-tachi no Yamato)

While not considered a classic by any means, this recent blockbuster was also filmed in and around Onomichi. It tells the story of the ill-fated battleship Yamato during the last days of WWII.

• Hiroshima, Mon Amour

This French New Wave film, directed in 1959 by Alain Resnais, concerns an affair between a French actress and a Japanese man who survived the bombing of Hiroshima. The film is considered very innovative for its use of flashbacks.

• Zatoichi

Parts of Beat Takeshi's 2003 take on the tales of Zatoichi the blind swordsman were filmed in Fukuyama.

• Ponyo on a Cliff

Miyazaki's next film, concerning a goldfish princess who wants to become human, takes inspiration from Tomo-no-ura, where Miyakaki briefly lived in 2005.

a civilian's yearly earnings for tax purposes. Miyamoto presents her inspector, Ms. Itakura, as a woman who loves her job, who uses her smarts and her charm to sniff out the increasingly ingenious scams of tax evaders. There is the businessman who hires young nurses in dementia wards of hospitals to seduce frail, dying patients so he can hide assets in their inactive bank accounts; there is the pachinko parlor owner who squirrels bankbooks away in custom-made cigarette cases and slot machines. And there is the teenage boy, befriended by Ms. Itakura, whose electronics-selling enterprise at school turns out to be a front for his father's money-laundering operation.

Itami stopped working for a few years after the release of *Minbo*, or *the Gentle Art of Japanese Extortion* (*Minbo no Onna*, 1992), which also features his wife. This film follows the exploits of

a young woman who takes it upon herself to resist feeble-minded extortion attempts by Japanese *yakuza* bosses. The story so offended real *yakuza* members that a gang of them ambushed Itami outside his home and beat and slashed him to within an inch of his life. He spent several months in the intensive care ward of a nearby hospital.

In 1997, five years after his hospitalization, Juzo Itami committed suicide by leaping from the roof of his office building. A Japanese tabloid, *Flash*, had published an article the week before accusing Itami of cheating on his actress wife (a charge he denied in his suicide note). If this sad event had featured in one of his movies, the Itami character would have survived; at the last minute, an onlooker would have talked him down from the roof or a flatbed truck would have passed by the building at just the right spot to provide him with a

soft place to land. He would have gone on with his life, chalking up the experience to a moment of bleak, and not altogether unamusing, insanity. But it was real life, not a movie, and Itami died, finally reverting back to a "typical" Japanese man who chose to resolve the (real or perceived) sins of his life with the ultimate act of self-sacrifice.

When I consider Itami's last act, I wonder if my first impression of Japan, the one gleaned from *Kokoro*, wasn't correct. *If a man like Itami can kill himself to settle his earthly accounts*, I think, *then maybe Japan really is all about solitary suffering and the fleeting poignancy of life. Maybe the sea and the gulls and the humming old man have it.* But then I recall Itami, as Mr. Numata in *The Family Game*, contentedly licking egg yolk from the tip of his nose, and I change my mind. And I love Japan more. §

AJETbulletin

A word from Cybil Litwiller, AJET Representative in Hiroshima Prefecture

Hiroshima AJET by CYBIL LITWILLER

Hello Hiroshima JETs!

We hope that everyone had an amazing winter vacation and a spectacular New Year! We're looking forward to seeing all the pictures and hearing all the stories at the Mid-Year Conference!

Before the break AJET had our annual *Bonenkai*. On December 15, 45 JETs headed to Café Bien in Hiroshima to celebrate the end of a great year. There were good drinks, great food and amazing people. And of course, no Japanese *Bonenkai* could be complete without a game of **BINGO**, in which many winners took home gifts. Shout out to Desmond... sorry about the star, or was it a candy cane? Better luck next time!

We've been planning some upcoming events to keep the winter blues away. Come out on January 24, after the first day of the Mid-Year Conference, and find out what your fellow JETs have



Hiroshima AJET-sponsored Bonenkai at Café Bien (photo by Cybil Litwiller)

been doing for the past 5 months. It will be at Café Spice from 8-10pm, which gives you enough time to do one of two things; head to bed in preparation for the Friday seminars, or head out on the town and experience Hiroshima's nightlife. It's ¥4200 for 2 hours of all-you-can eat and drink. There is also space for some live performances, so if you want to show everyone your spectacular musical abilities, please let us know!

Two events are in the works for February. First there is the Naked Man Festival in Okayama-ken. Come and watch (or

join) random Japanese men and your courageous fellow JETs fight for wooden sticks! We'll send out more information as soon as Okayama AJET sends it to us.

Also, we are looking into a ski/snowboard trip in the northern part of Hiroshima-ken in February. Please let us know if you are interested and if we have the numbers we will start planning it.

Of course if there are any events you want to see happen, please email hiroshimaajet@hotmail.com or let one of the PRs know and we'll look into it. §

• **January 24-25**

Mid Year Conference

Enjoy two days of helpful seminars run by your fellow JETs.

• **February 2-3**

Snowball Fight (Yukigassen)

Come cheer on Hiroshima's ALT team as they attempt to make it to the international snowball fighting championships in Hokkaido.

• **February 3**

Setsubun

Wondering about those demon masks at the grocery store?

While *setsubun* refers to the name of the day before each new season (the name literally means "seasonal divide"), the term is usually connected with the spring season. On this day, a ritual called *mamemaki*, used to wipe away the evils of the past year and ensure the health of all those in the new year, is performed. Soybeans called *irimame* are thrown out the door, or more popularly, at a member of the household wearing an *oni* (demon) mask; the soybeans are thought to be a way to purify the house from these demons who bring misfortune and ill health. The throwers chant "*Oni wa soto! Fuku wa uchi!*" (鬼は外! 福は内!), which literally means "Demons (or evil spirits) out! Luck (or blessing) in!" After the throwing, it is customary to eat one soybean for each year of your life (and sometimes an additional bean for good luck in the coming year). It is also customary to eat *makizushi* on this day, a practice that started in the Kansai region, but has since spread throughout Japan.

• **February 3**

Oshima Sazan Set Road Race

A 10km and half-marathon race in nearby Yamaguchi-ken.

• **February 9-10**

Miyajima Oyster Festival

Vendors will sell thousands of servings of oysters, both raw and fried, during this year's 23rd annual Miyajima Oyster Festival.

• **February 11**

National Foundation Day

Japanese celebrate the founding of their nation (thought to be on February 11, 660

BC) and the beginning of the imperial line, starting with the mythical emperor Jimmu, on this day formerly known as Empire Day. Empire Day, considered one of the main holidays in Japan before it was banned during WWII, was reinstated as National Foundation Day in 1966 and is now much more low-key than its previous incarnation.

♥ **February 14**

Valentine's Day

Unlike the Western version of this holiday, only men receive chocolates or gifts on this day.

• **February 16**

Hadaka Matsuri

Join in the proceedings, or just watch, as 9,000 *fundoshi*-clad men fight to see who can acquire the coveted *shingi* (bundle of sticks). For more information, please see the article on Okayama.

• **March 3**

Hina Matsuri

"The Doll Festival (雛祭り), or Girls' Day, is held on March 3, the third day of the third month. Platforms with a red cloth (緋毛氈 *hi-mousen*) are used to display a set of ornamental dolls (雛人形 *hina-ningyou*) representing the Emperor, Empress, attendants, and musicians in traditional court dress of the Heian period," the point of origin for the Hina Matsuri. It was believed that the dolls could be used to contain bad spirits; they would be placed on boats and sent down rivers to the sea in order to dispel these bad spirits and protect their owners.

• **March 3-5**

Returner's Conference

Workshops and seminars for second year and beyond returning (as opposed to re-contracting) ALTs are held in Yokohama. Space is still available for this very helpful event.

♥ **March 14**

White Day

Created in 1980 by some very savvy confectioners, White Day is a chance for men to give gifts (usually white chocolate or marshmallows) to all of the women who gave them gifts on Valentine's Day. And guys, keep in mind the gifts are meant to be three times the price of the gifts you received on Valentine's Day!

**NIHONGO
 no BENKYOU**

by ALEXIS FRANKS

TODAY'S TOPIC:

KANJI: 日本のことわざ

KANA: にほんのことわざ

ROMAJI: *nihon no kotowaza*

ENGLISH: **Japanese Proverb**

JAPANESE:

三人寄れば文殊の知恵。

ROMAJI:

Sannin yoreba Monju no chie.

LITERAL TRANSLATION:

If three people gather, it's Monju's wisdom.

ENGLISH EQUIVALENT:

Two heads are better than one.

VOCABULARY BUILDER:

- 三人, さんじん, *sannin*, 3 people
- 寄る, よる, *yoru*, to gather
- V+え+ば, if V
- N¹+の+N², N¹'s N²
- 知恵, ちえ, *chie*, wisdom

CULTURE BUILDER:

Mahayana Buddhism's Monju Bosatsu is also called the Guardian of Buddhist Law. He is considered to be the wisest of the bodhisattva. In Japan, Monju is often depicted riding a *shishi* (mythical lion). In his left hand he holds the Sutra of Wisdom and in his right he holds a sword that he uses to cut through illusion. Many Japanese students ask Monju's help in passing their school examinations.



日本の擬声語 (にほんのぎせいご)

travel:

OKAYAMA

Matt and Jen outline the main attractions of Okayama Prefecture, which lies just beyond Hiroshima's eastern border.

THINGS TO DO IN OUR NEIGHBOR 県

by **MATT** and **JEN**

There are a number of interesting and inexpensive trips convenient for Hiroshima-ken residents, but one of the best is a visit to Okayama-ken. Okayama offers many choices for the day tripper, from shopping to sightseeing. For those who would like to stay a little longer, there are five international villas to choose from and an assortment of unusual festivals to attend.

The first stop on any day-long itinerary to Okayama-shi would have to be the foreboding Okayama Castle (300 yen; daily 9AM to 5PM). Nicknamed Crow Castle, it is one of only two black castles in Japan. Inside, there are many displays of castle life throughout the ages, but a limited number are in English. Worth the price of admission is the view of Koraku-en Garden, considered one of the three best gardens in Japan.

The next stop would be a visit to Koraku-en itself (350 yen, daily 8AM to 5PM). Built in 1700, the garden, while traditionally Japanese, would not seem out of place on an English estate. Expansive lawns dominate Koraku-en, as does

JLAND • FACTS

- Frogs are a symbol of good luck in Japan.
- About 1000 new soft drinks are launched in Japan every year.
- Japan has about 1500 earthquakes each year.
- The two most common last names in Japan are Sato and Suzuki.



Hattoji, Okayama (photo provided by the Editors)

the view of Okayama-jo, looming in the background.

Just outside the walls of Koraku-en, there is a statue commemorating Momotaro, or the Peach Boy, a folk hero of Japan, famous for fighting an army of demons with his entourage of talking animals. Okayama is his birthplace and he is treated with reverence here: his image appears throughout the city and the main boulevard is named after him. To top it off, he has his own festival in August, the Momotaro Matsuri.

The Castle and Koraku-en are both part of an area designated as the Okayama Culture Zone. Inside the Zone, there are also three museums of note: The Orient Museum, The Okayama Prefectural Museum and the Museum of Art. A wide variety of shops and restaurants are scattered throughout the Zone as well, including one of the best bookstores in the area, Maruzen, which has a great selection of English language titles.

Another town to visit in Okayama-ken is Kurashiki, which has retained its centuries-old traditional Japanese buildings in the town centre. Apart from the lovely canal, complete with lazily drifting swans, you can sample some beautifully-presented Japanese cuisine in the

many traditional restaurants lining the banks as well as visiting one or several of Kurashiki's well-known museums. An excellent place for stocking up on local crafts, Kurashiki has some gorgeous buys on offer, including pottery, hand-dyed cloth and jewellery. There's also a great candle shop where you can have a go at making your own for 1000 yen.

There are also five international villas in Okayama. Established in 1988, the villas are a cheap and beautiful option for those who would like to spend some time either in the Okayama country-side or near the sea. A stay at each villa costs on average 3000 yen a night and there is a 500 yen discount with membership. The villas can be booked by room (with the common areas shared with other visitors) or the entire villa can be rented with an exclusive booking. The most convenient of these villas is located on Shiraishi-shima, which is only 20 minutes by train and a short ferry ride from Fukuyama. A stay at the villa in Hattoji will take you back to a different era. Hattoji is so traditional it was used as a backdrop for the film *Black Rain*, whose producers wanted to find an area that could evoke pre-war Japan. You can enjoy the traditional aspects of the villa, like the irori (traditional Japanese fireplace), without sacrificing modern

conveniences. For more information about staying at the villas, please go to <http://www.harenet.ne.jp/villa/>.

One of the most unique festivals in Japan has to be the Hadaka Matsuri, held on the third Saturday of every February at Saidaiji Eyo. 9,000 fundoshi-clad men compete in the freezing cold for possession of the shingi, or bundle of sticks. This is no normal bundle of sticks though, as the first to get it out of the temple grounds wins thousands of dollars. Consequently, the crowd can get quite dangerous and those who participate have been known to get injured, and on rare occasions die! So if you decide to take part, be careful!

Okayama is culturally rich and offers many rewards for the casual traveler; above all, it's representative of what makes Japan such a great place to live and visit! §



Okayama Castle (photo provided by the Editors)

Gaijin Gaffs

by GRAHAEME COWIE



CONTACT:
wideislandview@gmail.com

Questions? Comments? Something to contribute? This newsletter is written by and for JETs! If there is something you'd like to say, please don't hesitate to contact us!