

To Hokkaido and back

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I went on a three month road trip to Hokkaido and back with my partner Saya, from June until August this year. I had two main reasons for wanting to do this road trip. Firstly, I wanted to know what alternative ways people are growing food and educating children in Japan, so I planned to visit many alternative farms and schools. Secondly, I wanted to settle down in Japan, so I intended to search for possible places to live, and talk to people about their experiences moving to and living in the countryside.

We left Imabari on May 29th and headed towards Tokushima. We had heard of Kamikatsu-cho, famous for promoting zero-waste living, and Kamiyama-cho, a rural area that is particularly open to people looking to settle down in the countryside. We also visited Tebajima, a small, very beautiful island with no cars and about 100 houses. We talked to many people about life in the countryside, and about our wish to live rurally. While visiting these places, and thinking about what people had told us, we found two points that made us feel less optimistic about rural living in Japan. Firstly, people have strong expectations and worries about other people. Secondly, people tend to be narrow minded, and closed to new ideas. These two points combined made us feel that we were expected to change ourselves and sacrifice our principles to fit in with others.

Up until this point, for a long time, I had dreamed of settling down in rural Japan. However, I clearly remember, after less than a week on the road, and feeling discouraged about countryside living in Japan, Saya and I started to seriously consider settling down in my home country, New Zealand.

Next, we took the ferry from Tokushima to Wakayama. In Wakayama we visited people who build their own houses out of earth, straw and wood. The self-built houses were so beautiful, like art that you live inside! We visited free schools, and we ended up volunteering at a free school for one week. The free school encouraged free play and study, democratic discussion and decision making amongst the students, and time spent outside and in nature.

On the road again, we visited and volunteered at various natural farms and permaculture farms. The people we met care about preserving nature, growing and eating food without using poisonous chemicals, and having fun. I would highly recommend visiting Komeichi Nouen in Wakayama, Akamejuku in Mie, and Shantikuthi in Nagano.

Over mountains and across valleys we drove through Nagano, and in the mountains of Niigata we visited a cafe/camp ground called GaiA. The couple who own GaiA are some of the most open people I have met in my life. Because of their openness, they always have travellers, teachers, musicians and all kinds of guests staying with them. Days are spent cooking on the campfire, doing workshops, making art and music, dancing, doing yoga, cutting firewood, farming and talking. GaiA is a truly unique place.

In Yamagata I stayed with a friend from New Zealand. He took us to a vegetarian restaurant where they grow their own vegetables from heirloom seeds, and they save and propagate the seeds. The owner is very knowledgeable about the history of vegetables in Japan, where the seeds came from and when they came. He is doing very important work by saving seeds and spreading knowledge.

Hokkaido was much like New Zealand. Long roads with few people, vast areas of nature and agriculture, and lots of dairy products and farms. The Hokkaido summer was cool and comfortable (outside of the cities). We stayed for 11 days in Hokkaido, and slept outside in our tent every night.

On our way back to Shikoku, we visited GaiA and Komeichi Nouen again. We reflected on conversations we had had with many people. A common thing that people said, which left an impression on me, was that Japanese people tend to feel that they have no voice, no power to influence the way things are in Japan. So, people either just follow everyone else, or, they do things their own way, with the help of friends, and without support from society or government. Several people said "Japanese people are like domesticated animals." I agree with them.

How about you? Do you follow orders unquestioningly? Have you thought about and formed your own beliefs and opinions? Do you avoid sticking out for fear of being hammered down? I wish my Japanese brothers and sisters would have the courage to think, speak and act for themselves... In conclusion, the biggest realisation I had from this trip is that I value the freedom, honesty and quality of life in New Zealand more than the harmony and convenience of Japan.

