

Interview with a JET participant

In August, six new Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program participants from Alaska left for Japan to start their new lives and assist in English education at schools in Japan. We had the pleasure of interviewing Brent Pav, who has been placed at a high school teaching IB English in Yamanashi Prefecture.



(speaking Japanese) "My name is Brent Pav. I'm from the United States. I'm from Alaska. My hobbies are hiking and music. I am an anthropologist. Thank you for allowing me in your care." This has been my brief self-introduction for the entire month I've been here. Keeping it simple and to the point resulting in a warm reception every time. Considering I didn't speak any Japanese before arriving, I'm pretty proud at my progress. But to my fellow Alaskans, I'm an extremely lucky-in-life free spirit that's lived and worked across the United States and the globe in various roles including educator, researcher, explorer, anthropologist, humanitarian and sometimes... buffoon (especially when I lived with a community of chimpanzees in Uganda). I'm currently teaching International Baccalaureate (IB) English at a public high school in Kofu, Yamanashi Prefecture in the valley next to Mt Fuji.



Q: Thank you for agreeing to the interview! How is working in Japan? What is your school like and how are your students?

Sure. No problem. I have loved working in Japan since I've arrived. I can't believe I get to do this for the next coming years! Unlike other JETs that had some time to explore their area, a teacher drove me straight to school and I started working the day I arrived. It's been really fun adjusting to a new culture. I have lived in many different ones throughout my career, but adapting to Japanese culture has been really smooth because everything here is so efficient! My apartment is more urban, and I can walk to everything I need, and I ride my bike to school every morning.



My school is pretty cool. I have smaller class sizes because my students are pretty advanced in their studies. Many of them have university on the brain and so may have some stress with taking exams, but the IB curriculum I get to assist in teaching is really awesome. We sit in a circle and discuss international events, history, culture, and philosophy. My class size is quite small with 8 to 15 students so I can really learn how they think and the goals they want to achieve. The students are really polite, welcoming, and curious. My desk is in the main staff room with about 30 other teachers and, although there is a language barrier, I have been able to communicate well with many of them. They are so friendly and polite. The Japanese teachers of English are really excited about my arrival, and I've been invited to my first nomikai next week... nomikai is like a special invitation to a Japanese social happy hour with fellow teachers, but a very cultural phenomenon they take seriously in order to bond with the team. In Japan, they work really hard and efficiently, and it's nice to be recognized as part of their team.

Q: You've now lived in Japan for over a month! How is it? Has anything surprised you?

I'm surprised at how safe it is here. The streets are immaculate and peaceful. I'm in a small town, so I have all the comforts of home, but I never worry about anything when I'm out and about. I hardly ever lock my door to my place. I've also learned that the Japanese are super hard workers. The teachers work tirelessly for their students and really respect their opinions. Most teachers here are also government civil servants, so they are really cared for by their Boards of Education. This includes their physical and mental health as well as work stability. It's only been a month, and I could write a novel about what I've learned so far, but I will just say that people here are so friendly and welcoming. Oh... and it's so inexpensive to live here! My rent is so cheap!



Q: Do you have a “bucket list” of things you want to do while living there?

I'd like to travel to Nagano and see the Japanese macaques, also called snow monkeys during winter. I've never seen a primate that's not in a rainforest or tropical savannah... so I'm excited to see them. I also really want to go to Hokkaido, Okinawa and revisit Kyoto again. I'd also like to explore other areas of the countryside to understand how Japanese culture differs across the country.

Q: What's something you've found in Japan that you wish was in Alaska?

This is kind of a tough one for me, because while I'm here... everything seems so Japanese, and I have a hard time imagining it anywhere else! Japan is so unique and like no other country in the world. I'm so lucky to be a JET and experience teaching here as a real Japanese civil servant. I think the Gacha vending machines are super cool though and I'd love to have that in Alaska... also the convenience stores here are like all-inclusive one stop shops... You can get hot meals there that are quite inexpensive and delicious.



Q: Next year's JET program applications open within the next coming months! Do you have any advice for prospective applicants?

I think I'd say come with an open mind. If it's your first time being abroad, then this will be a wonderful experience. If you've lived abroad in other countries, it will be fantastic to live in a such a unique place. I'd say definitely apply! It's going to change your life in a such a good way! Also, don't worry too much... everything will be okay. Having an open mindset will allow you to grow in ways you never thought you could! Good luck!