



Japan Now: August 2025

Japan Now is the email newsletter of the consular office of Japan in Anchorage

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Light and Balance: The Akita Kanto Festival

Summer in Japan is full of festivals, and one of the most spectacular is the Akita Kanto Festival, held in Akita City, a sister city of Kenai Peninsula Borough in Alaska. Located in the Tohoku region of northern Japan, Akita comes alive each August with this traditional celebration.

The Akita Kanto Festival is held annually from August 3rd to 6th and dates back to the Edo period(1603-1868). Originally a ritual known as Neburi Nagashi, it was meant to drive away evil spirits and drowsiness (Drowsiness was disliked because sleeping or lying down was associated with illness and death). People would hang paper lanterns from bamboo sticks and parade through the streets. Over time, these simple displays evolved into the large and impressive Kanto poles seen today.

What is Kanto?

A Kanto is a long bamboo pole with horizontal crosspieces from which chochin (paper lanterns) are hung. The shape symbolizes stalks of rice plants that bend the same way under the weight of their own grains, while the lanterns represent bales of rice, symbolizing a bountiful harvest. This makes the Kanto an offering of gratitude and a prayer for good crops and protection from illness.

The Kanto poles vary in size, but the largest can reach a towering 12 meters (39 feet) in height, hold 46 lanterns, and weight up to 50 kilograms (110 pounds).

The Art of Balance

The most thrilling feature of the festival is the performance of incredible balancing techniques. Performers, called sashite, skillfully balance the heavy Kanto poles on their palms, shoulders, foreheads, or lower backs without any supports. These feats require immense strength, balance, and years of training, captivating the audience with each daring move.



Day and Night Performances

The festival is divided into two parts: daytime competitions and evening parades.

During the daytime, skill competitions are held where performers showcase their most impressive techniques in front of cheering crowds.

In the evening, the main event begins. Up to 28 large Kanto poles fill the streets, with a total of about 10,000 lanterns lighting up the night's sky.



Unique Features and Cultural Beliefs

The lanterns are lit with real candles, but they rarely catch fire, even when swaying dramatically. This is thanks to a small ventilation hole at the bottom of each lantern that lets air flow through, extinguishing the flame before it can spread if the lantern tips too far.

After the festival, used candles are kept as they are believed to bring safe childbirth. According to tradition, the shorter the candle, the shorter and easier the delivery, so many people keep them as charms for pregnancy.



Head Consul Hamada's Visit to Sitka

Courtesy Call to Alaska State Senator Bert Stedman

Courtesy Call to Sitka Mayor Steven Eisenbeiz

Meeting with the Sitka Tribe of Alaska

Meeting with the Sitka Economic Development Association



The 2025 JET Program Pre-departure Orientation and Welcome Reception

On Thursday, July 31st, two Alaskans began their journey to Japan to participate in the 39th annual JET Program. One heading to Shizuoka, ...

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Interview

CONNECTING
JAPAN AND ALASKA
THROUGH TOURISM



JUNCO SKINNER
A&P AMERICA & PACIFIC TOURS, INC



As Alaska welcomes its vibrant summer tourism season, we continue our spotlight on individuals who are building bridges between Alaska and Japan through travel and cultural exchange.

In this second installment, we are pleased to introduce Ms. Junco Skinner, Director & Vice President of A & P America & Pacific Tours, Inc., and General Manager of its Anchorage headquarters. A long-time Alaska resident, she has played a key role in fostering tourism and cultural exchange between Japan and the U.S. Pacific region. In addition to her leadership in the travel industry, she also serves as Chair of the Attu War Memorial Committee, helping to preserve the legacy of shared history between the two nations.



Background and Life in the U.S.

I moved to the U.S. about 30 years ago. The first place I lived in was Colorado Springs, Colorado, because my husband was serving in the Navy and was stationed there.

What made you decide to live in Alaska?

About 45 years ago, right after my husband graduated from college, he purchased land inside Denali National Park. His dream was to one day build a cabin there. When we got married, I thought, "Let's make that dream come true together," although at first, I wasn't sure if I could commit to it. While my husband was stationed overseas, I decided to spend some time in Alaska as a trial to see if I could truly live here long-term.

Having lived in places like Colorado Springs, Alaska, Yokosuka in Kanagawa, Misawa in Aomori, Lisbon in Portugal, and my husband's hometown in Florida, we carefully considered where to settle after retirement. Ultimately, we both agreed: Alaska is the place we truly love, and that's where we are now.

What led you to your current work?

While we were living in Lisbon, I experienced a serious illness. That changed my outlook, and I began to see life as a gift and felt a strong desire to do something meaningful for others and bring joy to people.

When we returned to Alaska, I felt inspired to help visitors create unforgettable memories of what may be once-in-a-lifetime trips. I also wanted to share Alaska's wonders, such as its diverse people, rich culture, and breathtaking natural beauty. Through my work, I also hope to raise awareness about environmental issues like melting glaciers and permafrost. That's how I came to do what I do now.

What makes your work rewarding?

One of the most fulfilling moments is seeing off our guests at the airport, when they say with a big smile, "This was a once-in-a-lifetime experience." It's also deeply rewarding when I can help visitors who run into trouble during their stay in Alaska.

Hobbies and Free Time

My hobbies include sewing, embroidery, making jewelry and making greeting cards. In the summer, we go out to our cabin and enjoy riding four-wheelers. In the winter, we love exploring the Alaskan wilderness by snowmobile.

Goals and Aspirations

My goal is to continue sharing the charm and beauty of Alaska with as many people as possible. I want to help guests create unforgettable memories and ensure they have a safe and enjoyable experience.



Tourism-focused Q & A

What does Alaska have that Japan doesn't, and what does Japan have that Alaska needs?

In Alaska, we can clearly see the vulnerability of our planet and the effects of global warming. For example, 30 years ago, you could see Portage Glacier from the roadside, but now it's no longer visible from there. At Exit Glacier, there are small signs along the road showing where the glacier used to be, like "In 1970, the glacier was here." Seeing these changes with your own eyes really makes you think.

How do you think Alaska needs to change if it wants to increase tourism?

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of cruise ships visiting Alaska has surged, bringing many domestic and international travelers. However, accommodations for non-cruise travelers, both groups and individuals, are often fully booked. Inflation and the weak yen have also caused tour prices to rise, making trips less affordable.

While cruise tourism doesn't require much individual marketing, I think it's essential to work with tourism bureaus to promote FAM trips and develop better marketing strategies for independent travelers.

How do you see the economy affecting visitors from Japan?

The weak yen and rising prices in the U.S. are definitely making travel more expensive for Japanese visitors. In addition, Japan's own economic stagnation is probably contributing to the overall decline in outbound tourism.



The Consular Office of Japan in Anchorage and the Japan Alaska Association are co-hosting a "2025 Japanese Summer Festival" on Sunday, Aug. 10th, 2025, from noon to 3 pm at the Kincaid Chalet (9401 W. Raspberry Rd, Anchorage, AK 99502). Please save the date and visit our booth!



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