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CIR's Corner

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Hello everyone! "CIR's Corner" is my monthly article about international exchange and cultures around the world. I will introduce a variety of interesting international topics.

This Month's Topic: An International Camping Trip

On July 29, I went camping with my family and a few of my friends. It was an international group, so we talked a lot about our home countries and our lives in Japan. It was a very fun and interesting camping trip!



First, let me tell you about the campground. Akaigawa Tomo Playpark is located southwest of Otaru. The quiet village of Akaigawa is located in a caldera, which is a large depression formed when a volcano erupts and collapses. The village is surrounded by mountains and forests. The campground was crowded, but we were able to find a good spot beneath some trees. The river was flowing nearby, so it was quite relaxing.

The campers were my Japanese husband, my dual citizen daughter, friends from Ireland, Germany, and New Zealand, and me, an American. The six of us represented five different countries!

My Irish friend's name is Peter. Peter lived in Sapporo for five years, but returned to Ireland in 2019. He planned to come back to Japan as a

tourist later on, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, he was unable to enter the country until now. Now he is enjoying his summer vacation in Hokkaido to the fullest by skateboarding and cycling every day.

I met my German friend, Madlen, through Peter. Before the pandemic, she had been studying in Sapporo for five months. Then, she did an internship at an architecture firm in Sapporo. She said at that time she often visited Niseko with the firm. She went back to Germany, but like Peter, she came back to Japan for summer vacation.

My friend Conor is from New Zealand. He came to Asahikawa, Hokkaido seven years ago to teach English. After spending a few years in Japan, he decided to go to Taiwan to teach English. He spent about two years in Taiwan, but since he liked Japan so much, he ended up coming back to his old job in Asahikawa. He married a Japanese woman last month, but did not bring her on this camping trip because, "she hates camping."



Campers: My daughter, Conor, Madlen, and Peter

As soon as we arrived at the campground, all of the non-Japanese people took off their shoes. We all enjoy walking in the grass barefoot. Madlen said, "The grass feels so nice on my feet!" I asked my Japanese husband why he won't walk barefoot in the grass, and he said, "Because it's dirty." Peter said that in Ireland, people enter their houses with their shoes on, so they are not too concerned about dirt. Madlen and Conor were shocked to hear that. According to them, people remove their shoes before entering a home in Germany and New Zealand, just like in Japan. Americans are like the Irish, so we also enter homes with our shoes on. However, both Peter and I have adjusted to Japanese customs, and we remove our shoes in Japan. Peter said he continues to remove his shoes before entering a house even in Ireland. By the way, my daughter didn't want to take her shoes off outside at first, but since everyone except for her father was barefoot, she eventually took off her shoes, too. She ran all around the campsite barefoot saying, "It feels good!"



For dinner, we had the standard Japanese *yakiniku* and grilled vegetables, but my husband also prepared his camp specialty: *lasagna*. *Lasagna* is an Italian pasta dish consisting of layers of meat sauce, white sauce, and flat pasta in a deep baking dish. It's topped with white sauce and cheese, and normally baked in an oven until golden brown. However, at camp my husband bakes it in his Dutch oven. The sauce was rich and the cheese was hot and melty, so it was very delicious. It was so delicious that we ate it all before remembering to take a picture. In addition, we had s'mores for

dessert, which I wrote about in last August's issue. I had to teach my friends how to make them, because they don't eat s'mores in Ireland, Germany, or New Zealand.



Night fell, and my daughter went to sleep. My husband opened his "camp bar" and made cocktails for everyone. While drinking under the stars, we discussed some of the hard things and fun things about living in Japan. Madlen said that even though she came to Japan to study Japanese, Japanese people always talked to her in English. Therefore, her English skills advanced more than her Japanese skills. She said she did not like being spoken to in English and treated differently from Japanese people just because she is a foreigner. She also said that since she is a woman, she has experienced sexism in Japan. The status of women in Japanese society is low compared to Western countries, so according to Madlen, it would be hard for a German woman to live here long-term. Peter agreed with Madlen, and added, "I've stopped some creepy men from groping women here." Groping and sexual assault towards women is a problem worldwide, but in Japan, it is a big enough problem to warrant "women-only trains," so perhaps it is more widespread here. Other than that, Conor said, "There are too many rules, and they're difficult to understand." On the other hand, Madlen and Peter said that the rules, and Japanese people following the rules, are precisely what make Japan such a peaceful country. One thing that everyone agreed on (including my Japanese husband) was that Japanese people work too much. Peter said, "It's hard to make plans with friends while I'm here because everyone is working!"



My husband's "Camp Bar"

We talked a lot about Japan's good points as well. Maybe it's because we were camping, but everyone said that they love Japan's nature. "The mountains are more impressive compared to Ireland," said Peter. Also, Madlen likes traditional Japanese culture, and has learned Japanese tea ceremony and how to wear *kimono*. Conor said that before he came to Japan, his image was that everywhere would be traditional like Kyoto. However, he was glad to come to Hokkaido to experience a different side of Japan. Everyone likes the convenience of Japan. For example, toilets, vending machines, convenience stores, and public baths are everywhere, which a cyclist like Peter is very thankful for. Madlen said that the portions of food and *bento* are just right. Peter likes the culture of sharing dishes family-style at *izakaya*. And Conor said, "Drinking outside is number one!" We are a group that enjoys *nomihodai* and *karaoke*, and we have been drinking together many times.



←A bug that flew into our campsite. We had never seen one before, so we took a picture and looked it up. Apparently, it's a dobsonfly.

As we were talking, it got rather late, and we noticed the lights of the other campers were out. "Japanese campers go to bed early," Peter said. Just then, we saw someone with a flashlight bouncing around like a rabbit from the direction of the restrooms. "What are they doing?" we all thought. Madlen called out to the person, and we realized that the rabbit impersonator was actually two

Japanese men in their 30s. "Sorry we were running weird. We're drunk." Madlen and Peter said, "It's ok! Come drink with us!" My husband offered the two of them a highball from his "bar." Then, they went to their own tent, and came back with a bottle of Otaru wine to share. The two men said they work at a university in Sapporo. One of them majored in languages, so he was speaking English, Japanese, and even a little German. I was happy to talk with them, and I thought that interacting with strangers from another group like this is a form of international exchange. I was also reminded that Japanese people are really friendly!

The next morning, we had breakfast, and went to play in the river with my daughter. It was shallow and flowed gently, so it was just right for her. Madlen and Peter submersed their whole bodies, and said that the water was so cold and refreshing. There was another Japanese boy playing in the river, but his father was standing on the riverside, just watching. I thought that maybe Japanese people don't swim in rivers?



After coming back from the river, we cleaned up our campsite and headed to an *onsen* in Akaigawa village. I've lived in Japan for 16 years, so I have been to the hot springs here many times and am familiar with the manners. However, this was the first time I've been to an *onsen* without shampoo available. Madlen and I didn't know what to do. We saw there was a bottle of shampoo near the communal washbowls and shower chairs, and we thought, "Since anyone can use these, maybe we can use this shampoo, too?" I picked up the bottle, and Madlen, my daughter, and I used it. We

put it back when we were done, and got in the bath. It felt very hot to me, probably because of the caldera. After enjoying a good soak, I was surprised to see the shampoo we had used was gone. "Oh no, we used someone else's shampoo!" Madlen and I were very embarrassed. Even after 16 years here, there are still things I don't know, and I still make mistakes sometimes.

I wrote in last August's issue that I didn't go camping much in America. Almost all of my camping experience has been in Japan, with foreign friends. When we were in the car on the way home, Madlen mentioned another good thing about Japan. Even though we're from different countries, foreigners in Japan form close bonds, and we can make friends with people we wouldn't

have been able to meet in our home countries. When various nationalities come together to camp, we eat food and have late-night talks that we can't have anywhere else. If you happen to meet a group of foreigners while camping, you should try speaking with them. You'll see they're very lively, and you're bound to have a good time! ★



A Foreign Resident of Ebetsu

There are over 800 foreign residents of Ebetsu. A friend of mine, Tyron Lee Triggs, lives in Ebetsu and reads *CIR's Corner*, so he wrote a self-introduction!



Hi, my name is Tyron Lee Triggs. I'm a half Australian, half African American expat, living in the beautiful northern island of Hokkaido, in the wonderful town of Ebetsu! I have lived in Ebetsu for over 4 years and find it to be a delightful location, and excellent for exploration, with the equal distance of 20 minutes to get to mountain, forest, city or sea. Prior to Japan, I lived in Sydney, Australia, in the famous beachside of Bondi. There I worked as a tour guide for BridgeClimb, a renowned Sydney attraction that offers guided climbing tours over the top of the famous Sydney Harbor Bridge. At the top, our customers, many of whom were Japanese honeymooners, would stand 134 meters above sea level, enjoying the best view of Sydney City possible. It's a must for any first-time traveller who visits! Now I call Ebetsu home, with my Japanese wife whom I met in Australia. We raise two children and live in the home of her late grandfather, who was a detective for over 40 years and a lifelong resident of Ebetsu. In the future, I hope to add to the various and unique food outlets here by creating authentic Australian hamburgers to sell to the people of Ebetsu. So, keep an eye open around the EBRI market area. I hope to see you and give you a taste of Australia! Thanks!



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