

A Passion for Japan

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John Rucynski

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Contents

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Come Sail Away: Finding My Passion on the Ship for World Youth
John Rucynski | 1 |
|---|---|

[1]

Come Sail Away: Finding My Passion on the Ship for World Youth

John Rucynski

John Rucynski taught EFL/ESL in Hokkaido, Morocco, the US, and New Zealand before moving to the Kansai region of Japan, where he has been based since 2004. He used to joke that he made a promise to live in Kansai until his beloved Hanshin Tigers won their first Japan Series title since 1985. Although it is uncertain when this will ever happen, he is satisfied with the abundance of delicious food, beautiful hiking trails, soothing hot springs, and friendly people in the region. If he someday gets a long enough break from teaching English and writing, his dream is to cycle or walk the length of Japan.

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The email message that permanently altered my relationship with Japan came ever so close to being deleted. My finger was on the mouse and ready to make that fatal click, as in my head I was reminding myself of the old adage, “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.” It was the summer of 2001, and I was in the computer lab (remember those?) of the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont, having recently completed the coursework for my Master of Arts in Teaching. But I couldn’t stop reading the email’s fantasy-like promises:

“Live on a cruise ship for 50 days with other young people from around the world!”

“Discuss international issues and visit ports of call along the way!”

“All expenses paid by the Cabinet Office of Japan!”

It certainly *did* sound too good to be true. But I also desperately *wanted* it to be true. After an intensive year of graduate studies to make me a more qualified EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher, I didn't feel ready to find my next job and head right back into the classroom. I needed something else first. I needed to discover my true calling. And I also wanted a global adventure. What I got was an adventure that has never stopped paying dividends. It turned out the program described in the email message was very good indeed, and also true!

FROM IDYLIC CHILDHOOD TO ARMY BRAT

But first, let me go back to the beginning. Not just my beginning with Japan, but to the very beginning. I grew up in the tiny port town of Oswego, New York (population just under 20,000), on the shores of Lake Ontario. Although the neighborhood kids I grew up with and I followed very different paths in life—I'm the only one who went halfway around the world to teach English—one thing we would all agree on is that our childhood was idyllic. Before the Atari 2600 video game console completely altered how we spent our time, we basically lived outdoors. A field just across the street from my house was big enough to serve as a baseball “stadium” for us throughout elementary school, with the parking lot in front of a dentist's office marked as home run territory. When the dental office workers went home in the evening, that same parking lot was transformed into a racetrack for us and our bicycles, the spokes of our bikes adorned with the baseball cards of our favorite players. Those summer days of play seemed to go on forever, occasionally punctuated by a home run ball that sailed through one of the dentist office windows, after which we would frantically gather up our equipment and retreat to the basement of my house, where we huddled around my father's police scanner, anxiously awaiting any reports of broken windows. When our field was covered with snow during the winter months, the baseball stadium became a football stadium. Or, if we had more

aggression to get out, off we went to the top of the nearest mound of snow for “king of the mountain” battles.

Although this may sound melodramatic to people who faced far tougher circumstances as children, my idyllic childhood came to an end with two words that simply made no sense to my 11-year-old ears: *We’re moving*. The rest of my adolescent and teenage years were spent living the typical existence of an Army brat,¹ changing schools every year or two. For someone who went on to embrace differences and develop a passion for visiting as many foreign countries as possible, my reaction to new places in those days was extreme resistance to change:

Harleysville, Pennsylvania: *What the heck is a hoagie? Don’t you know it’s called a sub?*

Lithonia, Georgia: *Who or what is a Bocephus?² Don’t you know that Led Zeppelin rules?*

Tomah, Wisconsin: *Um, this school has a rodeo team? Where in the world am I!?!?*

I would still manage to make great friends along the way, and eventually gain an appreciation for these differences, but that’s getting ahead of the story. Although I had no choice but to endure all these moves, all along I never wavered in my thinking that Oswego, NY was my one and only *home*. So, in my senior year of high school, the only college I bothered applying to was the State University of New York at Oswego. And why would I ever leave again?

At dinner with my parents one night as I was heading “home” to college, my father surprised me with a question he had probably had on his mind for years, but that completely blindsided me: “Now that you’ve lived in all these different places, don’t you think it was a good experience?” To this day, I’m not sure why I didn’t simply tell him what he probably wanted to hear. Instead, I was at a complete loss for words and only said to myself, “No. There is only one place I’ve ever wanted to live.” My answer to that question would change, but my father wouldn’t hear my answer that night, and we continued eating in awkward silence.

Like many American college students, I changed my major. I had started out in secondary education, but was suddenly horrified by the thought of spending the rest of my life at the same high school in

some small town (rather ironic considering my fierce attachment to Oswego, New York). I was drawn to creative writing because it gave me the opportunity to explore different worlds and perspectives and express myself. The idea of teaching still appealed to me—I just had to find the right kind of teaching. My future path became clearer when in my junior year I volunteered for the local branch of Literacy Volunteers of America, who were looking for private tutors for international students and other foreign residents whose first language was not English. I found this volunteer work both rewarding and fascinating: I was happy to be helping my students, and I was also captivated by their various stories and journeys to my home country.

JAPAN, PART 1: FLEEING TOKYO FOR THE FRONTIER

Despite growing up as an Army brat, I had actually never been overseas and I didn't even own a passport. But in my senior year of college, a strong voice in my head was telling me: *You've had your time at home. Now it's time to see the world.* In the spring of 1994, my older cousin Todd (someone I hardly knew growing up) visited Oswego and we spent a lot of time together. He enthusiastically told me about his upcoming adventure: teaching English in Japan. After he left Oswego, I thought that would be the end of it, but then his letters (yes, actual handwritten letters!) started coming, sharing amazing tales about his new home. One (or more?) of his letters included these magical words: *Just come. You can stay with me until you find a job.*

As crazy as it sounded to just pack up and move to Japan without a job lined up, this was still pretty common in those days. This was when *The Japan Times* English newspaper ran ads for English teaching jobs every Monday. Arriving in Tokyo, my Monday routine was to get up early, head to the nearest train station to buy the newspaper, and then spend the day making phone calls and going to the convenience store to fax in my resume. The rest of the week saw me hopping on a staggering variety of subway and train lines for interviews in pretty much every part of the sprawling city. In those days before Google Maps or train route finders on smartphones, I would hurriedly scribble down the directions for each interview. Although the person on the other end of the line was always speaking in English, it was like a foreign language to a small-town boy like me:

“Get on this train line. Go four stops in the direction of such-and-such. Be sure to take the *futsū* (local) train and not the *kaisoku* (rapid) or *tokubetsu kaisoku* (special rapid). You then need to transfer, but you can use the same ticket. But when you make the final transfer, you need to buy a new ticket because it’s a different train company....”

As exhilarating as my first experiences in this exotic new country were, I was also exhausted and overwhelmed. While there were many places I had already called home, none of them had been a big city. That’s when my cousin stepped in with more magical words, as he spotted something in the newspaper that I had overlooked (or ignored): “Hey, check out this job. It’s in Sapporo. That’s way up in Hokkaido.” I quickly consulted the “Google” of the time, the *Lonely Planet Japan* travel guide, which described Hokkaido as “the frontier of Japan.” I was intrigued. I interviewed with the Sapporo English language school recruiter in Tokyo, was offered the job, and within a week I had packed my bags again, this time for the northernmost main island of Japan.

I’m honestly not sure how long I would have lasted in Tokyo, but Sapporo became my home for the next six years. When people ask me that inevitable question, “Why do you like Japan?” three things I instantly mention are the food, nature, and *onsen* (hot spring baths). Of course these can be found all across Japan, but living in Hokkaido I became extremely spoiled. In a country with amazing seafood, Hokkaido is blessed with some of the best and freshest, thanks to the cold waters surrounding the island. I had countless meals exploring the wonders of *kaitenzushi* (conveyor belt sushi), feeling like a kid in a candy store as plates of tuna, scallops, and salmon came my way. I am from the generation of college students for whom “ramen” meant six or so packs of instant noodles for a dollar. My first true ramen experience in Sapporo was a revelation: a heaping bowl of handcrafted noodles served in a deep, rich broth (broth flavors vary across Japan, but in Sapporo miso is king) and garnished with toppings such as bean sprouts, boiled eggs, and slabs of fatty grilled pork. Ramen is such an institution in Sapporo that there is Ramen Yokochō (“Ramen Alley”), a narrow street with nearly 20 ramen shops stacked together. Locals I got to know, Japanese and foreign alike, tried to inform me that this alleyway was “only for tourists,” but that didn’t stop me from sampling as many of the

shops as I could and gaining a lifelong appreciation for Japanese food culture.

Nature and *onsen* go hand-in-hand in Hokkaido. I was fortunate enough to befriend an older student who was more than happy to introduce me to the natural wonders of Hokkaido—long hikes through the summer and into fall and then skiing on some of the world’s best powder snow. I almost said, “We’re going to do *what?*” when, on the drive back from a day of skiing, he said, “Now we will go to take a bath.” Take a bath? That’s something I do at home, not to mention *alone*. But then I saw *this* bath—a *rotenburo* (open-air bath) located right on the shore of Lake Shikotsu. Walking outside in my birthday suit in the middle of winter and then submerging into refreshing piping-hot water with views of the lake and falling snow was enough to overcome any culture shock and make me an instant *onsen* convert.

As with many of my fellow expats in Japan, my “maybe one-or-two-year adventure” turned into six years, which went by in a blur. It was an incredible six years, making a living working at English language schools while enjoying my spare time with a balance of Japanese and foreign friends, playing music, hiking and skiing, and making it my mission to discover every great *kaitenzushi*, ramen, and yakitori shop in Sapporo.

Don’t get me wrong: it wasn’t all bliss. I had—and still have—occasional struggles with cultural differences, from the indirect communication style of Japanese to the vast differences in humor to the painstaking adherence to rules. (I once spent hours writing end-of-year postcards to nearly a hundred students, only to have my boss ask me to start over because I had written in “the wrong color ink.”) But I was certainly grateful to cousin Todd for his words that had led me to Sapporo.

In the summer of 2000, I returned to the US for grad school. I wasn’t burned out or fed up with Japan; it just seemed like it was time. Despite six wonderful years in Sapporo, deep down inside I still felt like *I was born American and America is where I belong*. Or maybe it was more of a feeling that I didn’t belong, or have a sense of purpose, in Japan. Working at English language schools had given me the opportunity to meet Japanese people from all walks of life, aged 3 to 80. But it also seemed like my job consisted mainly of asking students about their weekends and discussing favorite restaurants in

Sapporo (not that I didn't like that topic!). I enjoyed my time working in English language schools, but was I passionate about it? No. I figured Japan was a place I would visit again, but it wasn't *home*. Yet.

COME SAIL AWAY: THE SHIP FOR WORLD YOUTH

Finishing up my coursework at the School for International Training, Japan still seemed like just a part of my past. And then the fateful email message came, with its promise of adventure aboard a cruise ship.

Obviously, I didn't delete that email message. I applied and was accepted as one of ten American "youth" (the generous definition being between the ages of 18 and 30) to make up the American delegation of the 14th Ship for World Youth (SWY) voyage. We would be joined on this approximately 50-day experience by delegations from more than ten other countries, plus around 120 Japanese participants. We were scheduled to depart the US for Japan in October of 2001, and then to set sail from Tokyo with ports of call in the UAE, Kenya, Mauritius, and South Africa, before returning to Japan in December. Our home for this voyage would be the cruise ship *Nippon Maru*.³

Not only did I nearly delete the email message, the program itself came very close to being canceled when 9/11 occurred the month before we were to depart. One stereotype about Japan is that, often due to risk aversion, decision-making can be painfully slow. In this case, however, the Cabinet Office of Japan moved very quickly to save the program by altering the itinerary so that we wouldn't sail into the Middle East. With only a few days to spare before the American delegation was supposed to congregate in Los Angeles for our orientation, I received an email from our national leader, Terry Cekola, along the lines of: "OK! Here's the deal. We are still going. We don't know where our ports of call will be yet, but the program is still on." Hooray! For the record, our new ports of call turned out to be Fiji, New Zealand, Singapore, and Thailand. But I would soon discover that it didn't really matter *where* the ship went; the important thing was *who* you were on the ship with.



The American delegation of the Ship for World Youth voyage 14, on the deck of the Nippon Maru (author far left in the front row).

Although I first participated in the 14th sailing of SWY, the history of this remarkable international exchange program goes back to the 1960s. To commemorate the centennial of the Meiji Restoration, the Japanese Youth Goodwill Cruise Program was launched in 1967 by the Cabinet Office, Government of Japan. The program created opportunities for Japanese youth to go overseas and engage in international exchange at a time when it was still difficult for them to do so on their own. Renamed the Ship for World Youth Program in 1988, the program expanded the number of international participants, with SWY1 hosting 173 “overseas participating youth” and 103 “Japanese participating youth.” The main purpose of the program is to “broaden the global view of the Japanese youth, promote mutual understanding and friendship between Japanese and foreign youth, as well as to cultivate the spirit of international cooperation and the competence to practice it.”⁴

Although participants live on a cruise ship during the program, it is much more than just a cruise! While SWY doesn’t grant college credits like the Semester at Sea program does, it was simply the most important educational experience of my life, as it featured an impressive range of international exchange opportunities. A typical

day might consist of club activities in the morning (including lessons on traditional arts or culture of the various countries represented), afternoon discussion sessions (each participant chooses a discussion course throughout the program, on topics such as education, environmentalism, or volunteerism), and an evening of presentations (each delegation gives a “national presentation” about their country during the program). During ports of call, participants visit schools or other institutions.

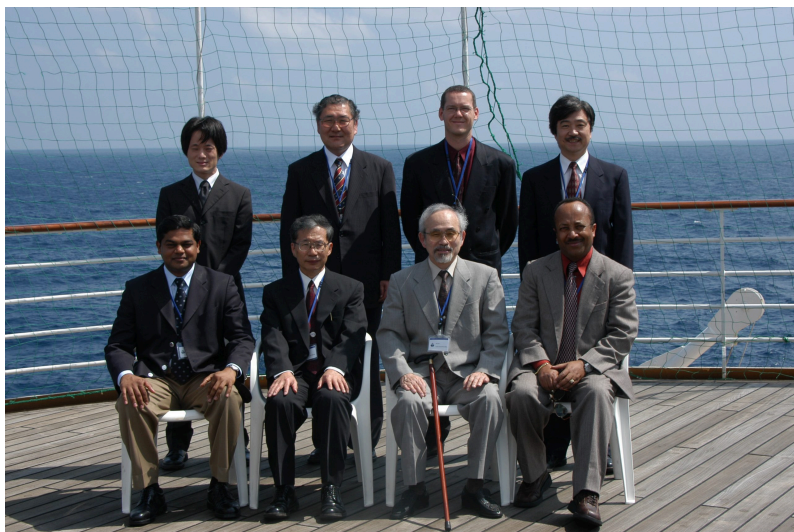
As often happens in life, however, many of the most rewarding experiences take place during unstructured time. Living together on a cruise ship, there is nowhere to escape to. And I mean that in a good way! It is international exchange in its purest form. Where else can you have breakfast with people from Australia, Bahrain, and Brazil, lunch with people from Egypt, Finland, and Greece, and dinner with people from Kenya, Mauritius, and South Africa? In those 50 magical days, I met and talked with people from more countries than I had in my whole life up to that point.

Returning to Tokyo and flying back to the US in December of 2001, I felt blessed to have had what I assumed was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Good fortune continued to shine on me, however, as I applied, and was accepted, to return to SWY as an advisor twice within the next five years, on SWY voyages 16 and 19. Advisors are responsible for teaching seminars and leading discussion courses with the participating youths. As an advisor, my appreciation for this program deepened even more.

Disembarkment back in Japan when the program comes to an end is always an emotional (some might say traumatic) day. All the wonderful new relationships built over several weeks at sea come to a cruel end as, one by one, different delegations are called away to buses transporting them to Narita Airport for flights back to their home countries. I have seen staff have to physically pull participating youths away from final tearful hugs to ensure that everyone gets on the bus and makes their flight home. I have seen more tears shed on the three SWY disembarkations I have experienced than in all the other days of my life combined.

While this day can almost feel like a funeral, on SWY16 (my first time as an advisor), I personally saw it as a rebirth. I was first attracted to teaching because I wanted to help others. Although I couldn’t articulate how I would do this, volunteer English teaching back in

college planted the seed of a desire to help people communicate with others from different countries with different languages. Witnessing and taking part in the intercultural exchanges on the SWY program, I finally felt truly passionate about this calling. This was hammered home when a Japanese participant suddenly walked up to me during disembarkment and said, “Thank you. You *saved* this program for so many people.” At first, I thought she had chosen the wrong English word—*saved*?—but she was happy to explain when I asked what she meant: “You were like a *bridge*. So many people had trouble communicating in English and understanding others. But you encouraged them. And they learned they could do it.” It remains the highest praise I have ever received as a teacher.



With my fellow advisors on SWY16.

So how did SWY help me find my passion for Japan? First, the program gave me faith in Japan as a place I could live and call *home*. Cynics like to dismiss Japan as an insular country where outsiders can never truly fit in. But there are insular people in every country in the world. Through SWY, I learned that there was a strong community of like-minded people in Japan who embrace international exchange. Wherever you live in the world, it is important to have a sense of community. SWY gave me faith that I could find communities in Japan to feel part of.

The SWY community is not limited to Japan, but extends across the globe. It is one of my personal missions to see as much of the world as I can, and on numerous trips to foreign countries, from Egypt to Peru to Sri Lanka, ex-SWY participants have welcomed me with open arms. Trips to new countries are always more rewarding when you know someone there who can provide a more local experience. And once a SWYer, always a SWYer. When I finally visited Sri Lanka in February of 2018, it just so happened that the SWY program was there for a port of call. All these years later, the Sri Lankan SWY Alumni Association graciously arranged for me to spend a night aboard my old friend, the Nippon Maru. But the SWY network provides far more than traveling companions; it also comes together in times of need. After the devastating 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, ex-SWYers from around the world donated money or did volunteer work to assist the affected countries. On a personal note, ex-SWYers also made donations to the charity bike ride from Kobe to Sapporo that I embarked on after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami.⁵



Seeing off the ship in Colombo, Sri Lanka, February 2018.

Most important personally, my experiences on SWY gave me a sense of purpose for my career. While I had enjoyed teaching and met many wonderful people at English language schools in Sapporo, for many students learning English was simply a hobby, and the only time they actually used English was in the language school classroom. This was not a “career” I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing. On SWY, however, I saw young Japanese people actively using English with people from around the world. I saw their struggles and successes. I also saw that as an English teacher in Japan, I could play a role as a bridge between Japan and the world.

JAPAN, PART 2: MAKING JAPAN MY HOME

After SWY16, and with my Master of Arts in Teaching in hand, I moved back to Japan and began teaching English at the university level, a job I continue to this day. I am fully aware that many university students in Japan view their English classes as just something they have to take in order to get credits needed for graduation. (This is no different from how many American students view their foreign language classes.) But I am also fortunate to work with a fair number of students with global dreams. They endeavor to study abroad, to use English in their careers, or to travel the world. Although I haven’t participated in SWY since SWY19 (2006), I have remained active as an English interviewer for prospective participants. This experience every year recharges me, as I see another group of young Japanese with strong English skills and global aspirations.

The SWY network in Japan has also been a great asset for recruiting guest speakers for my university. Our students need role models from the same cultural background who have overcome the same obstacles they face to achieve their global dreams. Masamitsu Fujita from SWY19 spoke to our students about how his world travels inspired him to open two successful guesthouses in Kyoto. Tatsu Sakamoto from the Ship for Southeast Asia Program (another Cabinet Office-organized program) shared stories about his four-year, three-month around-the-world journey by bicycle and how he later supported the digging of water wells in African villages to repay the kindness given him during his travels there. With my university’s current focus on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

(SDGs), I am currently organizing future lectures by former Japanese SWYers to talk about their experiences with marine conservation and refugee issues in Japan. To quote a catchphrase from an old American television commercial, SWY is “the gift that keeps on giving.”

So, returning to that question my father asked me more than 30 years ago: “Now that you’ve lived in all these different places, don’t you think it was a good experience?” Yes, Dad, I can wholeheartedly answer Yes! Several years ago, I was visiting Egypt and talking with a local friend (an ex-SWYer, of course) and she suddenly said, “You seem really relaxed here. But you also seem like the kind of person for whom culture doesn’t matter and you can just blend in anywhere.” I’m not sure how true that is, but it is certainly something I aspire to. I went from the kid who just wanted to spend his whole life in the same small town and mocked cultural differences to someone who now embraces them—I even ended up going to a Hank Williams, Jr. concert!—and wants to explore as much of this diverse world as I can in my short lifetime.

From the first time I set foot in Japan, there were many things I *liked* about this country: the food and drink culture, the nature and *onsen*, the temples and shrines, the punctuality and public order, sumo and Japanese baseball. But it wasn’t until I was outside Japan on a cruise ship somewhere in the middle of the ocean that I truly found my *passion* for Japan.

Notes

1. An “Army brat” is a child of someone (usually an officer) serving full-time in the Army or another branch of the US military, especially one who has grown up on Army bases or in military communities.
2. “Bocephus” is the nickname of country music star Hank Williams, Jr.
3. The names of many ships in Japan end with maru (丸), meaning “circle.”
4. Source: <http://swy.international/>.
5. More about my charity cycling trip can be found here: <https://2hjdbrblog.blogspot.com/2011/09/1000-mile-cycling-for-disaster-relief.html>.