

Report on the JET Programme D'Haese Marie-Laurence

Hi there! Nice to meet you! My name is Marie-Laurence D'Haese and since August 2024 proud to call myself the new CIR at the Aomori City Hall. In February of that same year I completed my Masters in Japanese Studies at KU Leuven and started looking for a job in Japan. And guess what? The stars aligned for me as the Embassy had just opened applications for the JET Programme around that time. I applied without any hesitation. Fast forward one year later and I am working as a CIR in Aomori City, quite literally the snowiest city in the world. It's true. Look it up.

At the time of writing this, I am finding it hard to grasp that I have been here for almost six months already! Time is doing what it does best: fly by when all you really want is for it to slow down. These past months have been a whirlwind of feelings and experiences. I met so many lovely people already and I am excited for the many future encounters still to come. It is difficult to summarize these past months into a 2-page report, but I will try my best.

First of all, I think I got extremely lucky with my workplace: my co-workers are all such warm people who welcomed me with open arms not only to the workplace, but to Aomori in general. One of my favorite memories so far was my *kangeikai*, which was also my first *nomikai*! It was so surreal to be at my own welcome party and to finally experience the Japanese (after-) work culture for the first time after having heard so much about it. I do not think I will ever forget it.



I am not the only CIR at the City Hall. I get to work with two other lovely CIRs from South-Korea and Taiwan (see photo at the Nebuta Museum!) who are always willing to give me genuine advice and support when I need it. And oh, did I need it. Because to be honest, I struggled a lot when I first arrived here and still do. Not only is this my first time to do interpreting and translating work, it is also my first ever working experience in general. Despite many initial worries and doubts, I decided to throw myself into this adventure and simply view it as a one-of-a-kind learning experience, because at the end of the day that's what it really is. If you never try, you'll never grow. :)

Now, let me actually tell you a bit more about my work at the City Hall! I am asked to do a variety of things: from interpreting and translating to teaching English. One of the things I did so far that I found really cool to do was the translation I did for the Nebuta Museum. I was asked to translate the contents

of the 2024 award-winning Nebuta floats. I learned a lot about the famous festival in the process and by the end of it I was fluent in Nebuta terminology.

Aside from translating, I host intercultural events where I introduce various aspects of Belgian culture. So far, I did a lecture on must-see tourism spots and our renowned comics! I also organized a fun *sinterklaas* party for elementary school children. I was never really a confident public speaker but I feel that I have been able to improve that part of me as well through these events and through this job in general. From time to time, I am also asked to organize children-oriented English classes at community centers. I made many happy memories during those classes! For the wildlife-themed class we made jumping frogs together and for the travel class every child received a plane ticket to an exotic destination and we practiced what to say at the airport!

Another main part of my job is interpreting for the many cruises that Aomori Port welcomes between April and October. Another core memory is my first time interpreting during one of the welcome ceremonies. Without any training whatsoever I was handed a mike and expected to deliver the message then and there. I somehow made it through the speech using my very basic Japanese. Even though it was not flawless and I am sure I forgot to interpret half of it, I was able to convey the overall message, which is already an accomplishment in my eyes! Ever since arriving here I have been taking an online translation and interpreting course provided by the JET Programme, which has helped me improve my skills immensely. I also participated in the week-long interpreting training together with many other CIRs from all over Japan. I got sent to Shiga for this, which meant that in between the intensive classes, I got to see a glimpse of Lake Biwa!



I would lie if I said everything went or is going smoothly. Interpreting is tough since I have no prior training for this. Also, did I mention they have a heavy dialect here called *Tsugaru-ben*? That makes it quite difficult to catch up at *nomikai*'s or to simply buy something at the grocery store. Over time I began to see this hurdle as something fun to decipher. I learn new words every day and try them out for myself at the risk of coming across as an 89 year-old woman. Oh well, I'll take my chances.

When I researched Aomori City before coming here it read: 'the snowiest city in the world.' And oh boy, the internet was not lying. Ever since December, I open my curtains to see... snow. Yet again. Heaps and heaps of it. Falling endlessly down from the sky. My colleagues say that this year has been the worst snowfall in 12 years. It is a true struggle getting places, but I am happy I'm here to live it. The snowy landscape makes for a beautiful commute. And this year I got to experience my first real white Christmas! :) However, before living here I never truly realized the hassle that comes with this

amount of snow. The need to leave your house 30 minutes earlier due to traffic congestions or simply due to repeatedly falling on the icy road and needing time to recover in between. Up until now I have only hit the ground four times. An acceptable amount I would say.



(Hirosaki Park)

I am sure I forgot to write down half of the things I wanted to share in here, but alas, they will not come to mind right now. I will jot them down in my next report! I am filled with eagerness and excitement for the next months and what they have in store for me. Most of all, I am looking forward for the snow to start melting so I can go out and explore some more of not only Aomori, but Tohoku in general. :) Thank you for reading all the way to the end! Until next time~