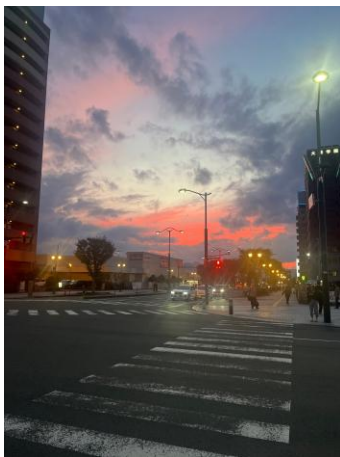


Hi everyone!

I'm Merel, and since August 2024 I've been working for Yamagata Prefecture as a CIR! Before my JET adventure, I got a degree in Japanese Studies at KU Leuven, and I also lived in Tokyo as an exchange student for a little over a year during the masters' programme. It's the start of a new year, and I'm also coming up on my six-month CIR anniversary, so it seems like the perfect time to look back on my time on JET so far.



When I first heard that I'd been assigned to Yamagata, I wasn't too sure how to feel. Even though I'd been to Japan before, I'd never gone further north than Nagano, and I've never been a lover of winter, so getting a Tohoku placement was a little daunting. On the other hand, this was a chance to see a completely new side of Japan, and to introduce the people of Yamagata to our country as the first Belgian JET in the prefecture.



As every single CIR you'll ever meet will probably tell you, what exactly CIR work entails really depends on where you're placed. In fact, 'what kind of work do you do?' seems to be a favourite conversation topic whenever CIRs from different COs get together. As for me, I'm a prefectural CIR, which means I work for Yamagata's Prefectural Office, along with three other CIRs from Korea, China and America. We don't all work in the same location though: I work at AIRY, the Association for International Relations in Yamagata, together with the Korean CIR. I won't go too far into detail on how the whole set-up works, so instead, here's an overview of some of the work I've been doing in the past six months!

- organise events for Yamagata Prefecture residents wanting to practise English speaking
- organise events introducing Belgium, including a lecture on Belgian beer with a mini-cantus (without actual beer 🍺)
- write for the prefectural CIRs' seasonal magazine, Face to Face, and create a Dutch translation (<https://www.airyamagata.org/%e5%a4%9a%e8%a8%80%e8%aa%9e%e6%83%85%e5%a0%b1%e8%aa%8c%e3%80%8cface-to-face-95%e5%8f%b7%e3%80%8d%e3%82%92%e7%99%ba%e8%a1%8c%e3%81%97%e3%81%be%e3%81%97%e3%81%9f%e3%80%82%f0%9f%8e%89/> click the fifth arrow to see the Dutch translation!)
- respond to requests for consultation as the English-speaking counselor of AIRY's Foreigner Consultation Desk
- conduct translation checks of various documents, including an English script for a speech the governor of Yamagata would be giving, and also recorded myself reading the script so the governor could practise pronunciation
- help out in English classes and attend English presentations at schools
- give presentations about Belgium at various places, and even teach a little bit of Dutch to middle school students!
- became Yamagata's CIR PA (Prefectural Advisor) within the JET Programme!

As you can see, work has definitely kept me busy, but I haven't let that stop me from exploring Japan. In the past half year, I've managed to travel to eight prefectures aside from Yamagata, including four I'd never been to before, and of course explored Yamagata itself as well.

In August, a huge group of Yamagata JETs went together to Shinjo matsuri, a festival where the people of Shinjo show off parade floats they've built themselves. At that point, it was my third week in Yamagata, so I got to make new friends while admiring the beautiful parade floats from the best seat of the house.



September started with a quick trip to Tokyo, then back to Yamagata to explore Zao Onsen and an illumination festival in Takahata, a day trip to neighbouring Miyagi Prefecture for Sendai Oktoberfest, and finally some grape picking in Nanyo.

In October, I went to Sakata on the coast of Yamagata to interpret for cruise passengers, and later that month attended a unique festival in my own city, Horetsu Shrine's Horetsu Matsuri, one of only three festivals that involves horse polo! Next up, Yonezawa's Sengoku Fireworks Festival, telling the story of the Sengoku period through a drone and firework show, followed by back-to-back *imoni* (a Yamagata specialty) parties. I also finally visited Yamadera!



In November, it was time for the CIR conference in Yokohama, so I got to see some friends and make new ones while visiting some of my old haunts in Kanagawa and Tokyo from when I was an exchange student. Back in Yamagata, I saw Manneken Pis! No, really, Yamagata City has its very own peeing boy statue, right in front of Kitayamagata Station. Crazy coincidence, right?

December was my busiest month yet: I went to Otsu in Shiga Prefecture to attend a one-week translator course, stopped by Tokyo on my way back for Belgian Beer Weekend, then jetted off again to Fukuoka to finally see my favourite group Seventeen live in concert, and then took a night bus to spend New Year's Eve in Osaka.



January 1st was spent in Kobe, and then I went back to Yamagata to visit Ginzan Onsen and to finally try snowboarding! It was really fun and I was really bad at it, and that's all I'll say about that. Will I ever become a snowboard pro? Stay tuned to find out!

Once winter break was over, two Shinto priests came to bless our office, and then it was immediately back into action. Workwise, this might be my busiest month yet, and February looks like it'll be even busier, so aside from a quick trip to Tajirojima, a cat island in Miyagi, I'll probably be staying in Yamagata and exploring my home turf in the next few weeks.



Now that we're nearing the end of the snowy period, I'm so excited to get out there and explore more of what this prefecture has to offer. Yamagata gets very few foreign tourists, but it has so many hidden gems, whether it be unique festivals or stunning views. I'm so glad that participating in the JET Programme has helped me fall in love with this place I hardly even knew anything about back in May, when I learned I was accepted as a CIR.

Working as a CIR has also pushed me to delve deeper into my own country's history and culture, and I've come out with a newfound appreciation of Belgium, that small idiosyncratic country with its three languages. Only six months in, I've learned so much, and I can't wait to learn even more about not only Yamagata, but also Japan, Belgium, and ultimately myself.

See you next time!

Merel