

## In the footsteps of Sakamoto Ryōma

“Next up, Mr. Bram Meens!” My name was called. I looked up from my notes with pronunciation guidelines that I was desperately revising. Wasn’t there supposed to be someone else before me?

There was, affirmed my friend seated next to me. But he didn’t show up, she added apologetically. I walked down to the lectern, my hands shaking. Those last few steps I started to doubt my whole speech on my experience working at a Japanese restaurant in Leiden.

But, if I may say so, it went smoothly. The audience laughed when they were supposed to, and I was able to answer the question that the jury asked me without too much trouble. However, there were so many engaging and interesting speeches on all kinds of topics that I couldn’t help but be stupefied when my name was called again, this time proclaiming me as the winner of the Yosakoi Kochi price in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Japanese Public speaking Contest.

It only really started to sink in when, after a trip of almost thirty hours, I looked out



1. The view from the airplane window on the tenth of July

of the airplane window at the small island of Shikoku, located to the north of Kyushu. A beautiful, sunny, mountainous four provinces where I would spend the next few days. Looks can deceive however, because, as I had been warned, I arrived during the tail end

of the rainy season and it was *pouring* outside. (Advice to whoever is going in 2020: try to align your visit with the autumn foliage!)

Waiting at the airport was Shoto, a representative of the Kochi prefecture, who was to be my guide during my stay. His enthusiasm and passion for all things Kochi was contagious, and, cliché as it may be, he became a good friend. After wandering around in

the Makino Botanical Garden and dining with the mayor of Sukumo I checked in at a gorgeous hotel overlooking the bay of Sukumo, famous for its *daruma-yuuhi*, a sunset that looks like a fiery orb descending into the peaceful sea.

Next morning was for me what I had been looking forward to the most: a chance to visit three different elementary schools in the area and tell the children about the

Netherlands, the Dutch language and our customs and culture. After having learned so much already thanks to all the friendly people of the prefecture it felt wonderful to be able to give something back. The children were eager and attentive and, after getting past their initial shyness, taught me Kochi slang words and showed me traditional games that



2. Making some new friends

they played during the lunch breaks.

While not all parts of my one-hour lecture were equally well received – licorice really is an acquired taste it turns out – it was a tremendous success overall. It is such a rare opportunity to be able to teach children with a complete different background as your own, and for me it was an eye-opener.

Last but not least we dived into the history of the prefecture, because I had mentioned beforehand that I'm somewhat of a history buff. One of the most famous people



3. Shoto and yours truly taking a picture with the samurai himself

from what is now known as Kochi is the revolutionary samurai Sakamoto Ryōma, who was assassinated by the Tokugawa Shogunate for his radically different vision on Japanese independence from foreign powers. There is a whole museum dedicated to him, the Sakamoto Ryōma Memorial Museum, and it was a blast to wander around and have Shoto explain all the

intricacies of his live and his ideals to me.

There is so much more I would love to describe and show, such as the incredible food, the beautiful beach front and the welcoming and funny people, but there is only limited space available to me. However, I would like to urge everyone, not just the next person to win this price, to put Kochi on your travel bucket list. It might not be as famous as Tokyo or Kyoto, but it offers just as much, if not more!

Alright alright, a view food pictures to wet your appetite!

