

News from Under the Southern Cross (Edition 55): My trip to the Hunter Region

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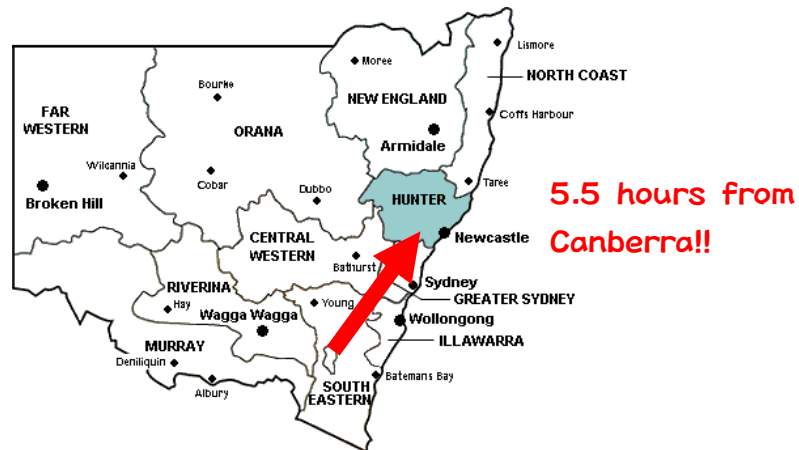
At last, I had the long-awaited opportunity to visit the Hunter Region. This was a trip with countless fascinating stops – from coal mines, ports and an ammonia plant, to wineries, pristine beaches and the emerald-green, ultramarine ocean.



An aerial view of the Hunter Region

1. Five-and-a-half hours by car

The Hunter Region is an area spanning 22,700 square kilometres (two-thirds the size of the island of Kyushu) with a population of 660,000, situated in the eastern part of New South Wales, north of Greater Sydney. The main hub is Newcastle. There are very few direct flights from Canberra, and high-speed rail will be still some time away, therefore a five-and-a-half-hour drive is the only option.



The location of the Hunter Region (map from the NSW State Government website)

Japanese readers might be thinking, “Do you make such an effort for a business trip?” But in the expansive continent of Australia, a trip like this is fairly run-of-the-mill. Indeed, one song of the famous singer-songwriter Paul Kelly begins with a scene of the narrator on the road from Melbourne to Sydney. It begins, *‘From St Kilda to Kings Cross is thirteen hours on a bus / I pressed my face against the glass and watched the white lines rushing past...’*

As for myself, as I watched the old-growth forests spanning out as far as the horizon, I looked for signs of my beloved kangaroos or koalas, and spent some time staring at the back of my eyelids.

2. Newcastle



The beautiful port of Newcastle

After leaving Canberra at three o'clock on Sunday afternoon, we arrived in Newcastle at nine o'clock at night. Our accommodation was right next to Newcastle Harbour. Some say Newcastle is one of the busiest harbour cities on the east coast. It is a peaceful city through which the scent of the sea and the whistles of tugboats and huge cargo ships are carried along by the breeze until late at night.

Incidentally, Newcastle has had a sister city relationship with the city of Ube in Yamaguchi Prefecture for over 40 years. From Sydney, I was joined by Consul-General KIYA Masahiko, Mr TAKAHARA Masaki, Managing Director of the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) in Sydney, and Mr KATAYAMA Hiroyuki, General Manager of the Japan Oil, Gas and Metals National Corporation (JOGMEC).

The next day, thanks to the kindness of the NSW State Government and City of Newcastle, I had the opportunity to ride in a helicopter and get a birds-eye view of Newcastle Harbour and the surrounding area. I was blown away by the great scale of the harbour and coal storage facilities that have been so crucial in shipping NSW coal to Japan for many years.



Observing the area by helicopter

Something that I found particularly interesting was an ammonia production facility operating right next to these coal-related facilities. While keeping in my mind the need to respond to climate change, I felt keenly the ambition here to partner with Japan even on ammonia and hydrogen – spurred on by persevering efforts to maintain the local economy in a way that suits the changing times, and the strong relationship of trust between our countries that has been cultivated by the trading of coal.

Using as a foundation the existing infrastructure in the Hunter Region, work is progressing on plans to build the biggest hydrogen hub in NSW. Timed with my visit was the production of a video in Japanese showcasing the wide variety of industries in the region ([available here](#)).

3. The ocean, and more ocean

Whenever I visit major cities in Australia, I cannot help but notice the ocean. Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth, Darwin – whichever city you choose, you can't ignore the ocean.

Of course, Newcastle is the same. Its reputation as a coal exporting port aside, as soon as our helicopter took off, we were captivated by the Pacific Ocean spread out before us, glittering emerald green around the shore and aquamarine in the distance.



The beautiful, emerald green ocean

When, amid the white surf, I glimpsed a pod of dolphins cruising playfully, I was absolutely convinced that the Hunter Region was worth the long journey from Canberra.

4. “How Green Was My Valley”

That night, we were invited to a meal at a winery in the Hunter Valley. Although it would take us just over an hour to drive from Newcastle, our schedule was so jam-packed that we once again took a ride in a helicopter. On this flight, as with the last, I learnt a lot.

Speaking of the Hunter Valley, one cannot help but think of the coal mines that have become so representative of Australia. I could see many large open-cut mines dotted around, while not far away I saw broad stretches of greenery in the areas being reforested. And beyond that, wineries galore.

With my eyes pinned to this scene, my mind turned to the phrase ‘the Sea of Fertility’ (one of my

favourite Japanese novels!) – instead, here was the ‘Valley of Fertility’. I can see now why Nihon University chose to build their campus there.

5. Australian wine to Japan!

At the Leogate Estate, where we had dinner, the owner kindly poured me glass after glass of the famous Brokenback wine. It was an unforgettable night.



Leogate Wine from the Hunter Valley

I pointed out in my speech ([available here](#)) that, while Australian wine is of such high quality, its presence in the Japanese market is not what it could be. Those in the group with the biggest market share in Japan are France, Italy and Chile, followed by the United States and Spain. It is clear that Australia has some distance to catch up.

Anyone who claims to be a wine connoisseur knows of not only the Hunter Valley, but the Barossa Valley's Penfolds and Margaret River's Leeuwin Estate. When you think that these wines are loved in the United Kingdom, Singapore and China, it is pity to see the situation in Japan.

With the help of NSW Senior Trade and Investment Commissioner to North Asia, Michael Newman – who arranged this trip for me – I hope to bring more Australian wines to Japanese dining tables.

YAMAGAMI Shingo