

News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 81):

Visit to Lismore

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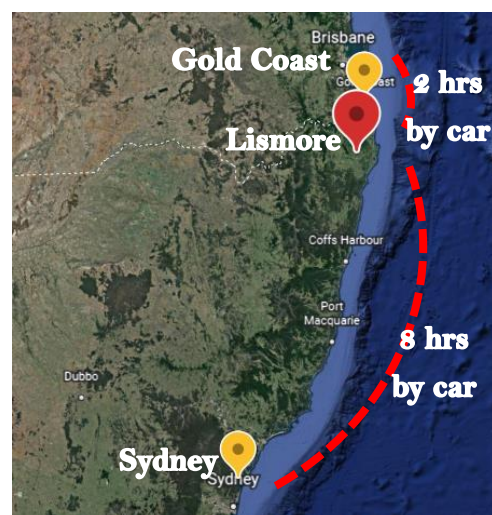
On my third tour around the various corners of Australia, my second destination was Lismore (see map below). This is a name that probably is not familiar to most Japanese people. Located in the far north of New South Wales near the border with Queensland, this peaceful city has a population of around 15,000. Even if you expand the scope to Lismore City LGA, the population is still limited to approximately 44,000. Today, please allow me to recount my visit to the region.



With local community members who joined Mayor Krieg and me in carrying the lantern of 'Miku-chan', the mascot of Yamato Takada in Nara Prefecture, at the Lismore Lantern Parade

1. No Easy Task

To put it plainly, getting to Lismore was no mean feat. There are no direct flights from Canberra, and it takes 8 hours to drive there from Sydney. Our flight left at 7:00 in the morning, so we stayed in Sydney the night before.



As I am not one to pass up the opportunity of a visit to Sydney, I extended a dinner invitation to some Japanese nationals living there.

In addition to the President of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce & Industry in Sydney Mr SHIRAI Hiroshi (also of Mitsui & Co.), Japan Club of Sydney President Ms Hisae Costello, and Japanese Society of Sydney Inc. Chairman Mr YAO Takashi (of Marubeni), there were also a number of people undertaking cultural activities, including Ms Tae Gessner, President of the International Kimono Club, J Culture Sydney Director & Executive Producer Ms HIRANO Yukiko, master koto player Ms ODAMURA Satsuki and Japanese calligrapher Mr YANO Ren.



This diverse group of individuals are day and night thinking up new and innovative plans, forever on the ‘front lines’ of soft power. While listening to stories we would not usually get to hear about their valuable experiences, I was further inspired to face my daily work. In terms of promoting Japan’s appeal, it was incredibly heartening to hear of the hard work of these people who, although working in different fields, are striving toward the same goal.

2. The Lismore-Japan Connection

We were awake at 4:30 the next morning and off to the airport. A Dash 8 delivered us to Ballina Airport, about 30 minutes from Lismore.



Our 7 am flight from Sydney



Arriving to blue skies in Ballina

As a matter of fact, out of the 107 sister-city/sister-state relationships between Japan and Australia (101 between towns and cities, 6 between states and prefectures), the oldest of these is between Lismore and Yamato Takada in Nara Prefecture. Next year marks the 60th Anniversary.

The reason behind this is that Lismore is the birthplace of Fathers Paul and Tony Glynn, who lived in Nara Prefecture for many years after World War II and worked tirelessly to promote Australia-Japan reconciliation. Perhaps due to this connection, Japanese education is popular in the area, and the Lismore campus of Southern Cross University not only teaches Japanese, but also constructed the Father Tony Glynn Japan-Australia Centre equipped with a Japanese-style tatami room in his honour.

Our visit to the University was arranged by long-time teacher Mrs Tazuko McLaren OAM. I gave a speech on the Japan-Australia relationship and enjoyed a lively panel discussion with teachers and students. (You can read my speech [here](#).)



Exchanging views with students at Southern Cross University



3. The Damage from Record-Breaking Floods

This event was not the only reason for my visit to Lismore. I also came to visit the town after the unprecedented floods that hit in February and March this year.

Just like in Japan, natural disasters are unavoidable in Australia. Among these, floods and bushfires are surely top of the list. In this region too, it is commonplace for damaging floods to occur once every couple of years, however this year's flood disaster was nothing short of a catastrophe.

According to locals, a number of factors including rainfall in the upper reaches of the Wilsons River which flows through Lismore, heavy rainfall in Lismore itself, and high tide at the mouth of Wilsons River in the Pacific Ocean all compounded to cause this disaster. The water level was 2.5 metres higher than that of the previous record floods, and 14.4 metres above the normal water level. The resulting tragedy saw the town's lowest areas completely submerged, transport networks and supply routes cut, and five people lose their lives.

As Mayor of Lismore Cr Steve Krieg guided us personally around the badly damaged art gallery, library and baseball complex, we were horrified by the overwhelming, undeniable power of nature. Given how deep an impression was made on me by Australia's encouraging support after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, I felt it was our turn to provide moral support and, for that reason, decided to come to Lismore.



Top: the Lismore Library (water reached the second floor – evidenced by the line below which the plaster has been removed from the walls)



Right: Lismore Art Gallery (the water level reached during the floods is being pointed out – visible as a line on the ceiling where the dirt ends)



Left: Lismore Baseball Complex (the pitch and second-floor club house were damaged)

The baseball complex damaged by the floods includes four grounds. This is a splendid training location the likes of which are not often seen in Japan. Even now, the back net and outer fence are still in need of repairs. However, I was told by Mayor Krieg that he is hoping the complex can be a training ground for Samurai Japan (the Japanese National Baseball Team) before the Brisbane 2032 Olympics, to which I immediately gave an emphatic nod.

4. A Big, Warm Welcome



Top left: a display case in the Japan-Australia Centre showing items related to Father Glenn

Top right: (left to right) Consul-General KIYA, Mrs Tazuko McLaren, Vice Chancellor Tyrone Carlin, myself, Hon Kevin Hogan MP, Mayor Krieg, and Mayor of neighbouring Ballina Shire Cr Sharon Cadwallader



Middle: musical performance by Dylan Curnow (music lecturer) and Grace Cockburn (Director of Isabella A Capella group)

Bottom: tatami area and hanging scroll in the Japan-Australia Centre

We received such a warm welcome from the Mayor of Lismore and those at the City Council, not to mention everyone at Southern Cross University. This may be because I am the only one out of every four or five Japanese Ambassadors in Canberra to make the trip to Lismore.

5. The Lantern Parade

The highlight of my time in Lismore was the Lantern Parade on Saturday 25 June.



Many spectators gathered on the streets to see the Lantern Parade make its way through the centre of the city

An original and inventive set of lanterns were paraded down Lismore's main street on the shoulders of local residents. Mayor Krieg, Consul-General KIYA, Executive Director of CLAIR (Japan Local Government Centre) Mr HIRAKI and myself together carried a lantern of 'Miku-chan', the mascot of Lismore's sister city, Yamato Takada.

After the drawn-out isolation and border restrictions of the Covid pandemic, immediately followed by the flood disaster, everyone in Lismore was surely in need of healing. Over 15,000 people young and old (a number that far surpassed that of previous years) packed the streets. With the glittering southern cross above them, these Aussies were clapping and cheering tirelessly at the sight of the softly glowing lanterns. Seeing their beaming smiles, I thought for a moment that I was watching a Japanese festival, and felt a wave of nostalgia.



People gathered at stalls in the city centre



Fireworks at the festival's finale

In Lismore after the floods, there was no looting or vandalism. People gritted their teeth and banded together, encouraging each other to pull through. That night, I recalled the quiet, steadfast manner in which Japanese people respond when disaster strikes, and I felt my appreciation for this commonality shared by Japan and Australia even further.



Pin badge received from Mayor Krieg.

Many places in Lismore display flags with red hearts

YAMAGAMI Shingo