

News From Under the Southern Cross – Edition 86. Distant Thursday Island

22 August 2022

At last, my dream of visiting Thursday Island (TI) became a reality. My attempt to visit last year sadly did not come about due to COVID-19. This year, on my desperate second attempt, and thanks to the efforts of many involved, I was finally able to travel that great distance from Canberra to set foot on TI.



1. Inspired by *An Evening Party in Thursday Island*

Two years ago, when I was first offered the position of Ambassador, I read everything I could get my hands on about Australia. One of the books that left the deepest impression on me, however, was SHIBA Ryotaro's *An Evening Party in Thursday Island* [translated from Japanese].

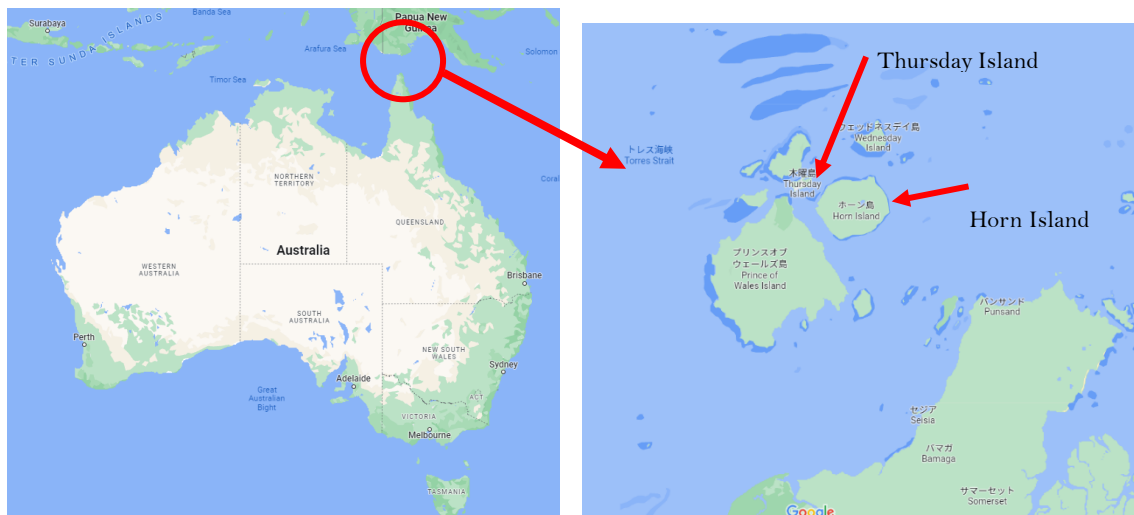
Ever since I was a student, from *Clouds Above the Hill* to *Burn, O Sword* [translated from Japanese], I endeavoured to read all of SHIBA's main historical works – however *An Evening Party in Thursday Island* clearly fell within my blind spot. Perhaps because it is a short story, it simply never appeared on my radar.

When I read through this story, I was charmed by the completely unknown, but

deeply interesting world that opened up. And I immediately felt that, without a doubt, I had to visit TI one day.

2. There's no place like home

This was all well and good, but TI is a considerable distance from just about anywhere. That is because the island is located off the very end of Queensland's Cape York or, put another way, in the southern part of the Torres Strait which separates Australia from Papua New Guinea (see map below). In other words, the Torres Strait connects the western Arafura Sea and the eastern Coral Sea, meaning it is also a location of great strategic importance.



Source: Google Maps

Going from Canberra, travellers must transit through both Brisbane and Cairns to reach Horn Island, where a ferry will take you to TI. It is certainly a journey which takes the whole day!

I am sure you are wondering, “Why is it called Thursday Island?” I was told that the day the island was discovered by explorers was a Thursday. Incidentally, the island to the east is called Wednesday Island, and to the west is Friday Island. However, there are no islands named after Monday, Tuesday, Saturday or Sunday. If Japan was to name some of its remote islands after these days of the week, that would not be considered a breach of intellectual property rights.

3. Turquoise blue

My first impression while riding the ferry from Horn Island to TI was of the brilliant, beautiful colour of the ocean. It was a hue somewhere between blue and green which, if it were a jewel, would be turquoise. I heard the Aussie term 'turquoise blue' and immediately noted, "That's it!"



View from the ferry between Horn Island
and Thursday Island

At the same time, I could see even with untrained eyes the speed of the current. Not to mention the water is home to sharks and crocodiles. This ocean, whose surface is gentle, sparkling with sunlight from the bright blue sky, is host to unforeseeable dangers. It is not surprising, then, that TI's beaches are closed for swimming.

4. Bonds between Japan and Australia



Diving helmet (Source: website of
Kushimoto Town, Wakayama Prefecture)

This tiny island with an area of 3.5 square kilometres and a population of less than 3,000 has actually played a significant role in the Japan-Australia relationship. From the 1870s until the beginning of the Second World War, many Japanese people – particularly from Wakayama Prefecture (and towns such as Kushimoto and Arita-mura), Hiroshima Prefecture or Ehime Prefecture – came here to be engaged with the pearl oyster industry, and worked harvesting pearls as divers.

To harvest pearl oysters from the ocean floor while wearing a heavy brass bell-shaped helmet, with a thick diving suit adding to multiple layers of inner wear, and all while using a breathing apparatus would have been incredibly hard work. Despite this, the Japanese are said to have dived 10 times more than those from other countries – around 50 times in one day – and were highly-skilled and

respected as divers, achieving outstanding results.

At the same time, diving in conditions against the strong currents of the Torres Strait and contending with the terror of cyclones, sharks and dangerous sea creatures made for incredibly difficult work, with death constantly by their sides. While they could earn extremely high incomes and send a lot of money to their families in Japan, countless divers lost their lives from things such as decompression sickness.

5. Meeting the grandchildren of FUJII Tomitaro

One man in particular worked so hard as a pearl diver on TI that, upon his release from an internment camp after the Second World War, 'Tommy' (that is, FUJII Tomitaro) returned to the island and became an influential member of the community. He even features as a central character in *An Evening Party in Thursday Island*.

The first event for our delegation upon our arrival in TI was a meeting with Japanese community members. Among the attendees were two grandchildren of the late FUJII Tomitaro. A photo of his younger self revealed Tomitaro was a man so handsome he could have been a movie star. His grandchildren are undeniably Aussie, counting among their ancestors local Torres

Strait Islanders and Europeans. However, in a certain light, I could see traces of the Japanese DNA which would have made their grandfather proud, and what is more, I was able to listen to their many precious stories.



Statue of FUJII Tomitaro on
Thursday Island

6. The memorial service

Our main purpose in visiting TI was to attend the memorial service on 15 August. As mentioned earlier, due to the incredibly dangerous work, more than 700 Japanese pearl divers lost their lives.



Memorial monument on Thursday Island

Headstones were erected on TI to remember these divers and a beautiful memorial monument was built in 1979. Since former Ambassador OKAWARA Yoshio came to the island to mark this occasion, I heard that I am only the fourth Japanese Ambassador to visit.

Memorial services have been undertaken since 2005, with Buddhist sutra chanting conducted by Brisbane-based Reverend James Williamson (Buddhist name ‘Tetsuyu’), who was trained at the Zojoji temple in Tokyo. In fact, he also devoted his chanting at the recent memorial service on 5 August for the 78th anniversary of the Cowra Breakout. (You can find my speech at this event [here](#).)

During this year’s memorial ceremony, under the blazing sun, I was graciously joined by Torres Shire Council Mayor Yen Loban and Deputy Mayor Councillor Gabriel Bani. The previous evening, they welcomed us so warmly to the island with a wonderful dinner which included traditional dancing from Torres Strait Islander children.



With local children who performed traditional Torres Strait Islander dances

In my speech, while expressing my thanks to the people of TI and Torres Shire Council who protect and maintain the cemetery, I conveyed my deepest sentiments of respect and gratitude to those Japanese who found their final resting places so far from their homeland. (You can read my speech on Thursday Island [here](#).)

7. Seeing with my own eyes

I certainly learned a lot from this visit. From activities and briefings organised by Mayor Loban and others in the Torres Shire Council, I was able to deepen my understanding of the situation not only on TI but in the broader Torres Strait. In particular, I came to understand that a lack of housing and the steep rise in housing prices are serious issues.

Furthermore, thanks to Queensland Police Officer Keiko Berry, who accompanied us all the way from Cairns, I was able to visit the Thursday Island Police Station and exchange views on issues such as domestic violence and drug trafficking from neighbouring countries which police officers there face on a daily basis. As the former Director General of Ibaraki Prefectural Police, I found the experience particularly valuable.

My old friend, Hon Warren Entsch MP (former chair of the Australia-Japan Parliamentary Friendship Group, and Federal Member for Leichardt in north Queensland – encompassing TI) who also happened to be visiting the island, was kind enough to meet me for dinner and share his views as a seasoned politician, which were very informative.



With Thursday Island police officers
and QLD Officer Keiko Berry



With my old friend,
Hon Warren Entsch MP

Besides all this, when I caught a boat to Friday Island from Thursday Island, It was very encouraging to see up close the work of Kazu Pearl Farm owner, TAKAMI Kazuyoshi, who has spent many years cultivating pearls.



At Kazu Pearl Farm on Friday Island

8. Issues for the future

As I walked through the rows of graves at the Japanese cemetery before and after the memorial service, I noticed the many beautiful headstone pillars. I learned they were shipped especially from Japan. Upon reading the inscriptions, I realised

many were from Wakayama Prefecture. Of these pearl divers who travelled so far south to eventually find their final resting place on TI, more than half were less than twenty-one years old when they lost their lives. I bowed my head deeply as I considered how much they would have desperately missed their homeland.

From the beginning, maintenance and management of the cemetery and headstones has been overseen by the Torres Shire Council, with financial assistance from the Japanese Government. The issue is that with the passage of time, increasing numbers of these headstones and grave-markers are decayed or leaning precariously (see the photo below). In response to this, I heard about Torres Shire Council's strong desire to properly restore the headstones with support from the Japanese Government and other corporations while working with Wakayama Prefecture's Kushimoto Town (with which they have previously interacted).



The restoration of many of the graves is urgently needed

An Evening Party in Thursday Island ends with the phrase, 'A Japanese is a Japanese'. I took it to mean that, wherever Japanese people are, they will never forget Japanese customs and virtues, and continue to take pride in Japanese history and traditions. The stories of these Japanese divers who dived again and again into the deep ocean to find pearls, with full knowledge of the dangers that lurked there, continue to be told even now.

Certainly, these Japanese who made such a sacrifice so early in their lives were the authors of a sizeable first chapter in the Japan-Australia relationship. I felt keenly that it is the responsibility of those who come after them, who are now enjoying peace and prosperity, to continue to tell their stories and honour their

contributions.

On the way home, while overlooking the turquoise blue ocean from the window of the propeller plane out of Horn Island, I felt deep in my heart that, 'I want to come here again next year. No, I *must* come here again'.

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