

# What Living Next to a Nuclear Power Plant in Japan Taught Me

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In 1998, I accepted an offer to teach English in Shika-Machi, a small town on the Sea of Japan. But no one told me that [Shika was a nuclear power plant town](#) until after I'd arrived.

The goal of the [JET program](#), as it was put to the 3,000 of us sent business class to Tokyo and stashed at a five-star hotel for orientation, was "to increase mutual understanding between the Japanese people and the people of other nations, and promote globalization." This seemed vague, but apparently the key to the plan was to put a native English speaker -- preferably a fresh-faced, recent college grad -- in every town, no matter how small.

In Shika, at dawn and again at dusk, music blasted from loudspeakers planted on every block. When I inquired why, my supervisor answered by telling the truth -- "It's an evacuation system in case of some emergency" -- just not the whole truth. It was a week after I arrived before I discovered the real reason.

I was at the library on Friday afternoon when an old man (was it just me, or was everyone in Shika over 60?) who introduced himself as Kamono-sensei, informed me that he'd been a [cram school](#) teacher and asked if I'd like a tour of Shika. The residual New Yorker in me thought I'd be nuts to get in a strange man's car, but I was restless and lonely, so I agreed.

"Arisu-kan," he announced, after driving me up a winding road to the top of a hill overlooking Shika, where there was a large brick complex on an emerald lawn as perfectly maintained as the roads in town. It planted with oscillating wind generators, upon which a few children -- the first I'd seen all week -- were playing in toy cars with solar panels. Fantastically, the complex was an "Alice in Wonderland"-themed museum of nuclear power: Arisu-kan. Alice Museum. Admission was free -- everything was free, including drinks and snacks and souvenir stickers where you framed your face inside Alice's blond hair and smiled for the camera.

Despite the lack of foreigners in the region, they had brochures printed in English and translated signs like one that read "Don't miss the exhibitions on nuclear power station simulations, ECCS, reactor scrimmages and others." The cartoon *karakuta*, or "characters," decorating the museum had been drawn cuter, to Japanese taste, but they were still familiar from Lewis Carroll's book. "Sir Caterpillar," for instance, had been imported to teach "Arisu" about "the many uses of radiation."

One exhibit featured a scaled-down version of a nuclear power plant's control deck, where kids could bang on buttons and twist dials, wreaking pretend nuclear havoc. Kamono-sensei explained that "Alice Museum" was built "to explain to the people of Shika how nuclear power works and so we won't be nervous." I asked why they would be nervous, and he brought me to the side of the museum, pointing out the enormous nuclear plant that sprawled below, belching a

plume of yellow smoke into the sky, like something out of Dr. Seuss's later dystopian stories.



Yomiuri Shimbun, MCT

It seemed strange that I had missed the nuclear power plant for a whole week, but it had clearly been built in such a way as to avoid attention, invisible from the flat parts of town. It seemed strange that no one had told me of its existence, either before or since my arrival in Shika. But strangest of all -- curiouser and curiouser, as Lewis Carroll said -- was this museum. Kamono-sensei explained, "We need nuclear energy, but we worry if it's safe or not. So the plant builds this museum to help us rest at ease."

The plant also gave back to the town in other quantifiable ways, like paving the roads to perfection, sponsoring a summer festival where they brought famous [Enka](#) singers, and paying for English conversation classes (guess who taught them?) not only at the plant but also at the community center.

Were these bribes? Of course. Did they work? Not entirely. I learned from my supervisor, who became increasingly candid as our friendship deepened, that there were petitions circulating to have the plant shut down; a sizable percentage of the population felt the risks outweighed the benefits. This was before an accident in 1999 placed the reactor in a "dangerous criticality state" due to improperly followed procedure.

"Problem is cutting corners," my supervisor said. "If we cut one corner and cut another and then another again, soon there is no paper left." So did he think that the nuclear power plant should be shut down? He wasn't sure.

Over the course of the year, I came to better understand the complicated relationship between the people of Shika and the nuclear power plant in whose shadow they lived. No one was excited about it. There were radiation monitors in the faculty room of every school in town. We all had iodine tablets in our desk drawers. That music I had heard earlier? It blasted twice a day to test the emergency evacuation system. At the same time, the famous bubble economy had already burst, and rural areas had been especially hard hit.

We are hearing a lot right now in the news about Japan's aging population, and that was clearly visible from the moment I arrived on the Noto Peninsula, which sometimes seemed to me like one big retirement community. When my supervisor was a boy, growing up in town, there had been three high schools, fairly well ranked. Now there was one, and it was a last resort. Kids whose test scores qualified them to enter better schools in the city would travel two hours by bus each way. The only way to get young people to stay was to find jobs for them, and the nuclear power plant in Shika provided lots of jobs. Also -- this is obvious but worth remembering -- Japan is an island nation, an economic superpower (at least it was) but with few natural resources. Nuclear power is relatively cheap -- provided nothing goes wrong.

If it has been frustrating trying to follow the news of what's really happening in Sendai from here in the U.S., it must be terrifying for people in Japan. One friend and his wife, who were forced to evacuate a town just 20 kilometers from the plant, hoped to make it to Narita airport on half a tank of gas, since there was no place to refuel. With Spring Break this week, they happened to have tickets to Hawaii.

Will they return? Unlikely.

Another friend has been living with her husband and three sons on his family's ancestral farmland, about 100 kilometers from the plant. They are organic farmers. Five days ago, he was convinced that the news, and the drama, were overblown. But then he changed his mind and told his wife to leave with the boys while they still could. She doesn't think they'll be back for a decade. These are people with ties to the United States, who have options to return here to live and find jobs. But what of those from the contaminated areas who have no alternative place to go -- or means to get there?

In the aftermath of an earthquake and tsunami that led to unbearable, mounting loss, it is understandable that the Japanese government has been trying to prevent panic over the nuclear catastrophe. And it's hard not to feel anything but compassion for the Japanese people right now -- even their leaders, who certainly didn't do anything to prompt tragedy heaped upon tragedy.

Having lived in a nuclear power plant town in Japan, however, I can't help but recognize that evasiveness is a byproduct of shame. Shame over needing nuclear power, hoping that nothing goes wrong and not taking proper precautions, has led to other cover-ups in the recent past. The extent of the radiation leak at Shika's nuclear power plant was suppressed until 2007, when people were shocked and outraged to learn not just the truth of the exposure, but that they'd been lied to.

Much has been made of the lack of looting following the tsunami, the way that the refugees are lining up for their rations, taking their shoes off before entering their makeshift shelters. I find this deeply moving, too; it reminds me of the best of Japanese culture, and I think it can give us all real hope for Japan's recovery. At the same time, part of me can't help but worry about people who have been so well-schooled to follow rules, not to question authority, for the sake of the group.

Harmony is important, but more so is health. The Japanese are famously resilient. As one saying

goes, "Fall down seven times, get up eight." That said, I hope that the Japanese leaders can stop acting quite so Japanese, at least when it comes to informing their citizens of the truth about the levels and spread of radiation, so that they can make up their own minds about how far they want to travel away from it.



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