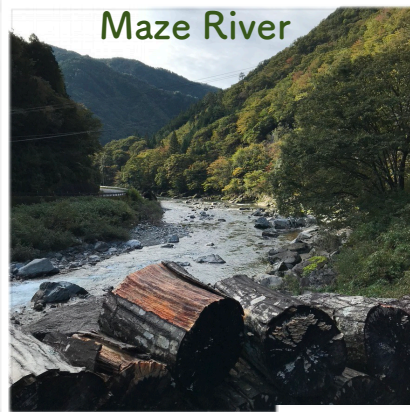




Our Nagoya Apt



Mountain Life Hida office I



Maze River



Fitting Room A



Mori no Ninja Forest



- In October last year we left our Chisan Mansion in Nagoya where we had been teaching English and moved to Maze Nishimura in Gifu prefecture
- Here we started working for Mountain Life Hida (MLH), an outdoor activity org, running high ropes and canyoning (sawanobori 沢登り) courses
- We moved into Fitting Room A, previously an Udon restaurant, repurposed to house foreigners volunteering in the forest
- We filled our days with work, trying new foods and drinks, hiking, onsen-ing, cycling, sight-seeing, making new friends, attempting to learn Japanese and joining in community events. I accidentally won all my ping pong games one night and since then have earned the title, 'Ping Pong Monster'
- We experienced our first Autumn, watching our new change color (momiji / kōyō 紅葉), quietly and then dramatically.

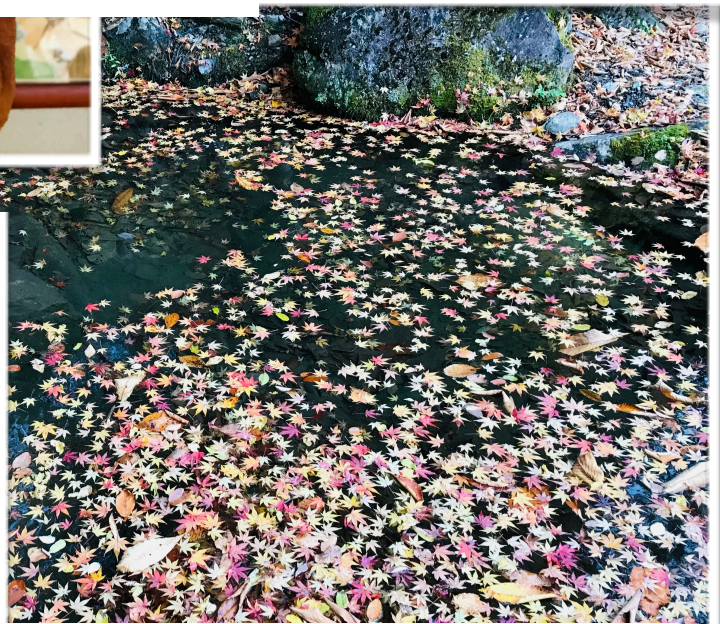




Chestnuts, Shiitake & Ginkgo nuts



Persimmon 柿



Gero Onsen

- We bought a car. A 2008 silver Voxy van, with enough room to throw a futon in the back
- We spent three nights with a community group making tochi mochi, an olden-time mochi made from horse chestnut (and less rice) undergoing a long filtering process using ash and boiling water to remove the toxins 🙄.
- We found a Christmas Tree, decorated it, made Christmas puddings in an outdoor boiler and Christmas Dinner in the outdoor clay oven
- As winter approached Cameron's work turned to building platforms in the trees and my work changed to a cleaning job at the local onsen hotel, Miki no Sato.
- We woke up to snow (yuki 雪) and found ourselves living somewhere different again. Our inner child bursting at the seams, face glued to the window pane and feet itching to play
- In winter everything was a highlight. Stumbling back from the shrine on NYE in the snow. Walking to work in the deep snow. Hiking in the snow. Waking up to snow. Snow fall. Mesmerizing and always different. Captivating landscapes. And. An electricity bill to make us quickly seek alternative accommodation!!!



Our Foxy Voxy



Tochi Mochi

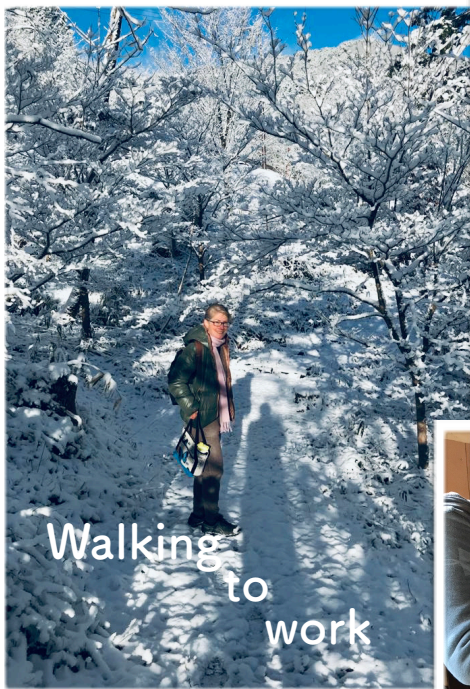


Plum Puddings

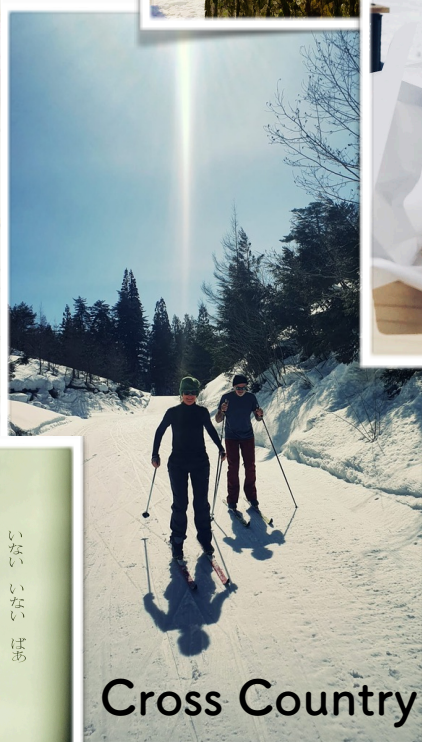
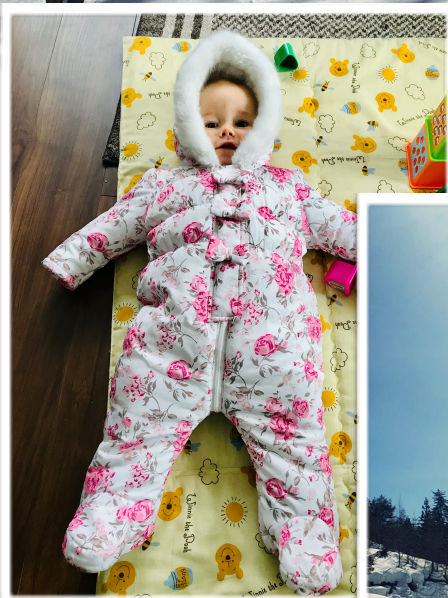
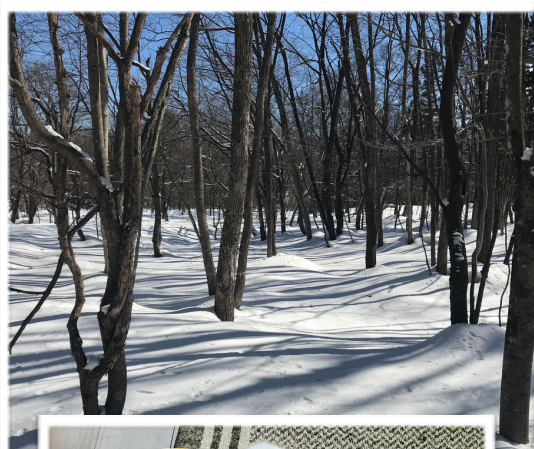


Friends visiting



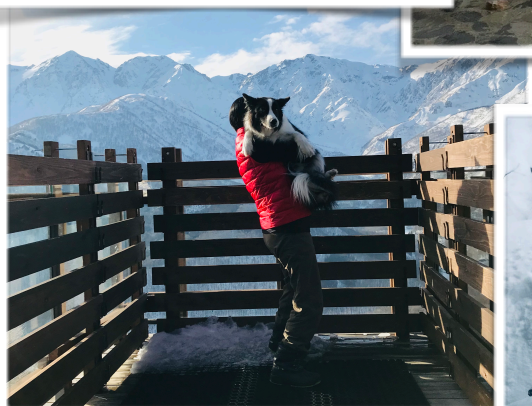


- My cleaning work at the hotel slowed down at the end of January as another surge in Covid cases kept people at home. This and our scary denki 電気 bill got us searching for a WorkAway program to complete our winter hibernation. WorkAway links travelers with volunteer opportunities in exchange for somewhere to live! The opportunities are varied and help make traveling more affordable.
- Through WorkAway we found a gig in Hakuba, Nagano prefecture, (about a 4-hr, 185km, drive from Maze). Our hosts were a couple from New Zealand who purchased a ski lodge in 2018. Our job was to care for their 10 month old daughter and do cleaning and carpentry work at Hakuba Matata Lodge. Typically the winter season would be thriving, Hakuba being one of the most popular Japanese ski towns for locals and foreigners. This year of course was different. There were some guests, but mostly we had a very relaxing time.

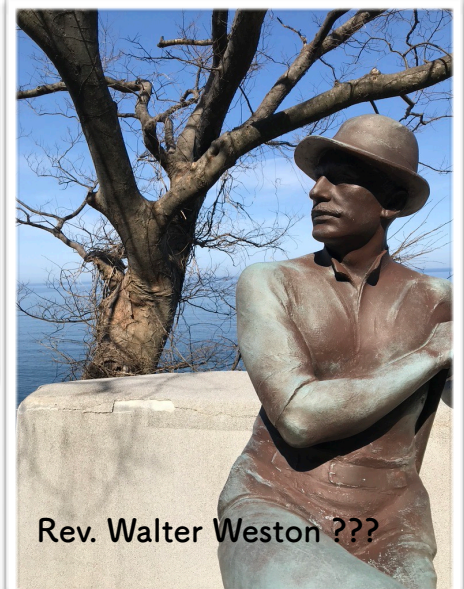
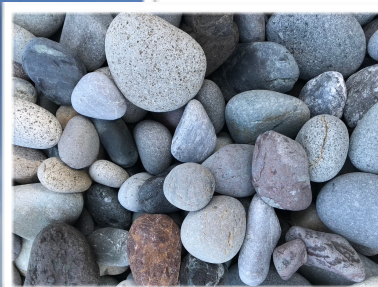


Cross Country

This stack made me belly laugh (such a strange position to end up)



- Cam was charged with building outdoor furniture but still had quite a bit of time to go snowboarding, both on the field and back-country. He also had chance to hang out with the cool kids one day, the exceptionally skillful women and men (including our NZ hosts) who snowboard and ski like they are in a James Bond movie. This of course is my assessment. Me, whose pace is cross country skiing. Check their antics out here (https://www.instagram.com/tv/CL9I2ybnucE/?utm_medium=copy_link)
- We ate pie! An Australian couple started a bakery at Norikura. Sitting at the base of of the ski field, drinking beer and eating pie was a rare treat.





● We returned to Maze at the beginning of March. We took our time driving back, visiting the coastline (Sea of Japan side), walking where Bashō (the great master of haiku walked (he walked many places in Japan!) and seeing, smelling, feeling the sea for the first time in forever.

● I have committed one Bashō haiku to memory

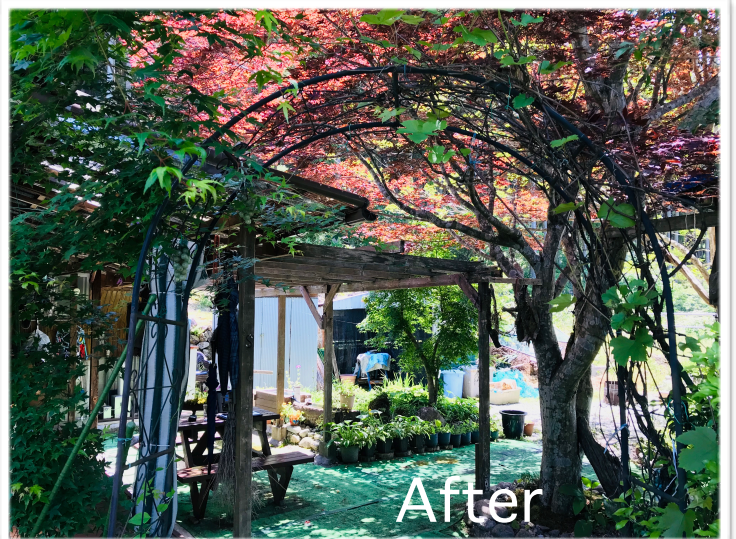
furu ike ya 古池や

kawazu tobikomu 蛙飛こむ

mizu no oto 水のをと

An ancient pool/ A frog jumps in/ The sound of water

- We moved back into our lodging at the Mountain Life Hida Office, needing to find new digs by the end of March. Cam and I had our eyes on some pretty nice real estate, unfortunately this was unrequited and now we are living in a small fishing shack, a bessou 別荘 (holiday house). It's super nice actually. It is owned by an older couple from Osaka who holiday here in the summer but due to the pandemic are staying home. It's cheap (although haven't seen the utilities bills yet 😬) and it sits on a small hill overlooking the Maze river, an eerie pine forest to the back (sure there's bears there) and mountains to gaze at in the close distance. The garden here has been a surprise. When I moved in I judged it a bit of a mess, but as the weather warmed, the many, many, many plants started to bloom and the trees grew back their crowns. It has become a tiny place of miracles. Mainichi 毎日 (everyday)! Flowers follow flowers follow flowers. As one dies another variety is waiting at the wings. The colours, sizes, shapes, always changing, always surprising. The creatures, bugs especially, are new to me. Different snakes I inadvertently unsettle and monkeys (saru 猿) that sneak by for a garden snack. There is a crepe myrtle in the centre of the yard, just like the one in our front yard at home on the GC. I've heard a few people refer to this tree as a saru-suberi, a monkey slip/slide, giving the monkeys a run for their money.
- And while all this unfolds in my own backyard, it is of course unfolding on a larger stage in the village of Maze. Flowers, Rice fields, blossoms, trees, rivers, mountains, hills, insects, waterfalls, sounds, smells, days lengthening, greens, temperatures. Nothing stays the same for long, but most things it seems can be counted on to return.



- As I type this (31 May 2021), Japan has just extended its current state of emergency until 20 June for 10 prefectures. Establishments that serve alcohol are asked to close and those that don't serve alcohol are asked to close by 8pm. Residents are asked to stay within their prefecture and not go out after 8pm unless necessary. Everything is 'asked', nothing is 'demanded'. I'm pretty sure this approach would not work in Australia, but in Japan, I think largely it does. Although many Japanese people are critical of this less authoritarian approach, as they are of the Olympics going ahead. Other prefectures, including Gifu (where we live), are under strict non-emergency measures. So Kendo finishes at 8pm now!



- We started learning Kendo and I wonder why I, a lover of Star Wars, did not attempt this before. One can wield a shinai 竹刀 and (wooden) katana 刀 while wearing a traditional Japanese uniform (that I reckon could pass as a Jedi costume). The clothing and armor are beautifully tailored, many are indigo-dyed and hand embroidered. Putting on the clothing is a ritual in itself. I have no idea if we will take kendo very far. I am struggling with the most basic skill which is to shout, as an expression of one's fighting spirit, when striking your opponent. I hope to master this soon 🙏.
- Cam got a job in March teaching English online with a pretty cruisey company. He teaches mainly young Japanese men and women from Tokyo working across various industries. He bought a new bike and has been on many exploratory rides now, discovering, among other things, new sites for the sawanobori (canyoning) season which he will start guiding in June. He's also been doing some carpentry work at MLH, both in the forest and on the MLH office.



MLH Office II



- Japan has been good to us. And Maze in particular has welcomed two strange foreigners. We are often welcomed into people's homes and people often welcome themselves to our home. Cameron and I make many observations of our time here. We talk about what Japan feels like to us, how we see the culture as different from our own more familiar cultural vibe in Australia. Making these comparisons seems useful. Feeling the parts of us that resist and the parts that want to flow with that new current is interesting. Perhaps we're not too old in the tooth to change. Of course, we're not too old. And what is old anyway in Japan. The most centenarians of any country in the world and yet the people I meet, many easily categorized as old, seem young. What is young? And so the questions tumble, but for now, we are grateful for skipping town when we could, a small miracle, and having the experience we are having. There's no urgency is there?

Love Susan 🐢