

# IOC Newsletter

## December 2005

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### Greeting

Happy New Year to all members! I hope everyone had a great time whether in Japan, at home overseas or somewhere else altogether. I've just got back from 3 weeks in India although I'm sorry to say that I think I brought the infamous "Delhi Belly" back to Osaka with me! Anyway, before we have a look at the Christmas events, I want to apologise to Yoshimi for not including her great article on the Uji Hike along with the photos of same in last month's issue. It was a complete accident. So with further ado...



*"I'm on the top of the world...looking down on creation..."*

## Hira-san hike by Ross

Sunday, 2<sup>nd</sup> October

On October 2nd I joined my first trip with KIOC. We tackled Mount Bunagatake. At 1,300 meters, it stands the tallest of the mountains in the Hira-san range. This is located around the Lake Biwa area...about 30 miles northwest of Kyoto.

That hike stands as one of the best days I've had in Japan so far. I met some really kind people, and experienced the true countryside of Japan. It was great to be on such a trip, and not have to worry about where to go or how to get there. Of our group, two Americans, a Frenchman, and the rest Japanese, we hiked for a steady 8 hours led by an incredible guide who must have been 60 years old. There was a great group of people there including Jeremy, Nao, Thomas, Hideo, Sugiko, Yukkuri, and Ken Takahashi.



*"Hey Ken, how's Barbie?!"*

We started in the rolling countryside, moved into dense forest with magnificent waterfalls, and reached the summit of Mount Bunagatake, a sparse peak littered with beech trees. At the summit a helicopter circled our group and came unusually close. We waved a lot, and a passenger waved back. I felt like we were being rescued from a failed mountaineering expedition. The rest of the hike would take us through fields of susuki - a large pampas grass, along swamp plains filled with black lizards, and to a deserted ski resort that had an eerie ghost-town resemblance. I saw deer, two large snakes, and many interesting beetles.



*There's a hard way...and an easy way!*

We had a great time singing down the trail and watching Jeremy and Nao frolic around like school children. But, I do have to give big ups to Jeremy for sharing his lunch with me. I would have passed out without it. I also had a great time talking with Ken, who not only sang some American jazz tunes for me, but also shared stories about the International Yahtzee circuit. Ken revealed there is some strategy, but admitted it was mostly luck and mostly about drinking beer.



*"...mostly about drinking beer."*

We descended the mountain at dusk, reaching the Train station at dark. The rest of the evening was spent eating some okinamiyaki in Osaka. Good company, good hike....can't wait for another hike.

### **Uji Hike by Yoshimi**

**Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> November**

"Lots of lucky things"

The first lucky thing to happen was getting beautiful weather on the day of the hike even though the weather forecast had predicted a 70% chance of rain three days prior. We thought ourselves even luckier the day after the hike because it was raining and that was the day we had first planned to have the hike.

The second lucky thing about this wonderful event was that lots of non-IOC members took part. No doubt I love the IOC members a lot but you know everybody needs fresh air sometimes! Some members brought their friends to the hike and those friends brought their friends too. That's why there were nearly 30 participants even though it wasn't an annual event. On the other hand, there was one downside: It was almost impossible for everyone to remember all the names in such a short time...!

The third lucky thing: we had good conversations and enjoyed some seasonal autumn hiking. It's easy to imagine that nearly everyone got along without bothering about names. It wasn't a big problem. We set off from Uji station on the Keihan line and walked along the Uji River. After a while we ran across a stamp rally game which was being held by Uji town. I'm not sure how I should translate "stamp rally" but I'm sure most of you know what I'm referring to. You have to go and collect stamps using a map (a bit like orienteering). The rally was well organised so most of us had fun. We called to some shrines and temples along the way (I can't remember the names)... and then followed the hiking trail of a small mountain located next to the Uji River to get to the *Amagase* dam. It was not a hard hike so it suited me! Just so you know, I'm famous for talking a lot even whilst hiking. The only problem is it always makes me tired.... Oh I have to put it aside now to report about the hike. Well, we stopped at several lookout points to enjoy the great views and we exchanged some food or an interesting story to help us relax.

The sun moves quickly across the sky in autumn. After a good walk it was getting dark fast, and our stomachs were requesting food urgently. So it was exactly the right time for a BBQ!! The fourth lucky thing: a mass of tasty food was prepared for us. I just knew that Benoit, who was the leader, and Yuka and Junko, who were the co-leaders had done it. If there were some people to help them, we have to thank them too. Thank you so much to all the people who prepared. Especially thanks to Benoit who cooked a tasty stew and made two nice salads. The stew was really popular. Only a ladle was left in the pot when I opened the lid! I have to add that everyone gladly helped to set up the BBQ.

I think we got lucky enough on the day, and lots of people including me enjoyed the event a lot. But something occurred to me. A few people had difficulty walking because of inappropriate shoes and clothing. And another thing: it was already completely dark when we started to set up the BBQ. I guess one reason is that we were such a big group, so it's so hard to follow the schedule. Everybody knows the sunset is early in autumn, so maybe we should have been more careful with the time. Please, don't get me wrong. I really appreciate the work of the leader and all the helpers. It's not their problem but ours. I suppose what I'm trying to say is that an event could be made safer if we consider these things more carefully next time.

### **Blizzard on Rokko by Minhao**

**Sunday, 4<sup>th</sup>**

Rokko Zensan Juso (六甲全山縦走) is a popular hiking event held annually in the Rokko mountains north of Kobe. The event is actually organized by at least two organizations including the city of Kobe and 兵庫県勤労者山岳連盟, which roughly translates into Hyogo Prefecture Workers' Alpine League. Several hikes are held in late November and early December each year, participants can number more than three thousand for each hike. It is such a popular hike that there are many repeat hikers who will do it every year. The Rokko Mountains stretches from the coast of Suma, snaking through the north of Kobe, forming the backdrop of the city and extends further north towards Takarazuka. The full hiking course follows the ridgeline of Rokko, measuring 56 km in distance. The highest point of the hike is at the peak of Rokko, which is at the elevation of 931m. The hike is not considered particularly difficult, but the distance of the hike plus the occasional steep ascents mean that this is not for the casual hikers. Some level of fitness is needed and if you are trying to go for a time record, training is certainly required. However, with ample practice, the hike can be done by anyone; in fact I have even met a much older hiker on the trail, as old as 70 years!

Jeremy and I had done the hike last year and it was such great fun that we decided to do it again this year. I invited Dominikus, from Germany and was here in Japan for a short stay to join us, while Jeremy invited his girlfriend, Nao and fellow American, Sam. On the Sunday of December 4<sup>th</sup>, we started off in Suma-Ura Koen around 6 a.m. The hiking course this time was slightly shorter than the full 56 km, a few peaks were skipped totaling in a distance of about 42 km. The brisk morning breeze greeted us as we were about to start the climb, the air was slightly humid although we weren't thinking anything unusual about it. Dominikus mentioned something about a rainy forecast today, but I shrugged it off.

The first three hours of hiking was pleasantly uneventful. We arrived at a crossroad, one trail leads up to the mountain; the other follows a motor car road. The mountain trail passes through the Suma Alps, which is a favorite local viewing spot because of its splendid view of the surrounding terrain. This was of course much more preferable than the plain old motorway. The mountain trail was a fairly steep climb and we soon realized that Nao and Sam were not used to a long hike like this and was going at a slower pace. Dominikus and I wanted to go full tilt and the

group split into two; Dominikus and I would go ahead while Jeremy stayed behind to take care of the rest.

It began to rain soon after we split. At first it was a light rain. Dominikus said "This hike is really great but I sure hope this rain would stop." Unfortunately, as the hike went on, it turned out quite the opposite of what he hoped. We went on anyway. The rain was intermittent, pausing for a short while sometimes, but always resumed later. The prolonged rain had soaked through our thin jackets gradually, even though we did not realize it. The sudden shock came as we went further up in altitude, temperatures dropped and periodic gusts of wind blew past us. We couldn't stop shivering. I put on my rain gear belatedly, hoping that the rain will stop soon and my wet jacket would dry eventually. But this hope never materialized. We speeded up to keep warm. As we approached Kikusui-yama, which was 456m high, temperatures dropped further even as the rain continued,



*Snowstorm at Kikusuiyama*

"It's snowing!" exclaimed Dominikus. Tiny white flakes were gently floating down in front of me. The mountain was covered in white patches of cotton-like snow. This was very surprising for me as it seldom snows in early December in Kobe. The ground was wet with a rain/snow mixture, which made it even more difficult to tread. That it was snowing means that it will only get colder as we climb and I had mixed feelings about this snow. True enough, the snow got heavier and soon the mountain was fully covered with snow. I stopped and looked around. The trail meanders up into the hill, trees were covered in white, and the forest was serene. It was such a peaceful moment that I thought I could appreciate it like a

painting if not for the freezing cold that I was feeling at the same time. Dominikus increased the pace further; he was even running at times so that he could stay warm. We finally reached Kikusui-yama. The snow was getting heavier and the winds were gathering strength, it was as if a snowstorm was coming. People were clutching desperately to their umbrellas and huddled closely together in the little gazebo that was on the mountain. One of the event helpers commented that she had never seen this in twenty years. It was a rare occasion indeed!

We could not rest for long, the cold was getting into our bodies and the only to fight it was to keep walking. At this point, we had already walked for five hours but it felt like ten. We were toying with the idea of just going to Rokko peak and go down the mountain to Arima hot springs instead of finishing the whole course. As we got down from Kikusui yama to lower grounds, the weather turned better. The snow had stopped although a slight rain persisted. After a cup of hot tea at a rest station near Dairyuji, we thought the rest of the hike was going to get better. For a little while it did seem to get better, we were doing at a fair pace and if conditions did not worsen, finishing the hike by six in the evening seems doable. But luck was not with us, as we started ascending again towards Maya-san, which was elevated at 702m, the temperature dropped progressively. At first it was simply amazing to see the gradual change in landscape, from a wet autumn forest to a white winter land. Then the cold starts to set in again and we were reminded that we did not prepare well for this kind of weather.

By the time we reached Maya-san, it was so cold that we couldn't stop without shivering. The top of Maya-san is famous for its magnificent view of Kobe bay, the "million dollar night view". Now, Maya-san was covered with a heavy fog and we could not see anything 10 m away and it was more like a scene from the cold mountains further north. The double whammy of rain and snow was sapping our strength, having wet, soggy clothes made things worse. Dominikus was especially affected by the cold, probably because he did not have rain-gear except for the jacket he had. I told him that we could get some hot drinks at Maya-san, but that didn't cheer him up a bit. Vending machines on top of Maya-san were selling all sorts of hot drinks, even minestrone soup! At that moment, I decided that whoever invented vending machines selling hot drinks and putting them on a cold mountain top was a genius extraordinaire. I quickly selected the minestrone soup and gulped down the hot contents like a hungry bear. Dominikus seemed to feel much better after his coffee. At that point, none of us thought we could finish the hike anymore. It was simply too cold and we were not prepared for this. We decided that we should just stop at Rokko peak and take a nice hot bath at Arima after that. It was another one hour and half of hiking on paved motor road and we felt that could be done easily.



*Don't be fooled by our smiles. We were shivering to the bone.*

But we were wrong again. The weather changed so fast, it would be calm one moment then a sudden gust of icy cold wind would come, cutting our faces like knives. Despite our efforts at keeping warm by going at a jogging pace, it was not very effective. A supposedly pleasant hike in the autumn hills had turned into an endurance trek in the winter mountains. We were exhausted and cold, and were ready to get off the mountain by any means. I spotted a bus stop and realized this could be our ticket off the mountain. The next bus was to arrive in 15 min; we waited patiently for the bus. The bus came on time but just as it seemed to be coming to us, it made a left turn and went down the road that leads to the foot of the mountain. Imagine our shocked and surprised faces when we saw that. A few expletives later, we finally figured out that the schedule on the bus stop was actually for *another* bus stop 20 meters in front of us! The next best option was to get off by the Rokko cable car, which was 2 km away from us. We started walking at a brisk pace and reached the cable car station in about 20 minutes. We got off the mountain finally and took a bus to Hankyu Rokko and asked a bemused stationmaster where the nearest public bath was. We quickly found the public bath and were finally able to shake off the cold after such a long hike.

A few lessons were learnt here. Always be prepared for a hike in the mountain, especially when you know that the weather might change suddenly. Even a mountain as tame as Rokko can show her wild side once in a while. Cold and waterproof gear is a must in winter hiking, as we learnt the hard way, once the rain and snow gets through the outer layers, there is no way to keep warm without drying. Always have a backup plan in case things go wrong. We were provided with instructions on how to get off Rokko before the hike in case of emergencies; this came in handy when we decided we had to get off the mountain before we got colder.

This episode is a simple lesson of how preparedness can make a huge difference. Climate changes can be sudden and even dangerous if a hiker is not well prepared.

More information about the Rokko Juso can be found at the following websites (Japanese only).

兵庫県勤労者山岳連盟

<http://www.nextftp.com/hyougo-rousan/#anchor1>

City of Kobe

<http://www.city.kobe.jp/cityoffice/17/040/Rokko/>

### **Cycle, Cycle, Run by Shinobu**

Jigoku-dani Cycling with Tetsuya on Nov. 27<sup>th</sup>,

Somewhere near Jigoku-dani Cycling with Kaori and Rie on Dec. 3<sup>rd</sup>,

Daibutsu Marathon in Nara on Dec. 4<sup>th</sup>.



“It’s fun to stay in the YMCA”

Recently I have been kind of active in the IOC. I asked Tetsuya to organize a bike trip on the Gallery night since I enjoyed cycling with John, Jacquelyn, Chris, and Kei on the previous weekend. Soon after that day, I found his event on the website, and happily I signed up. The participants were only Tetsuya and me. The thing that made me so nervous was he looked tougher than before and he showed up with his road bike though mine was a MTB. The cycling might be really tough. But the route was nice. We enjoyed beautiful views of coloured leaves in the Settsu area. We stopped by a temple to enjoy the autumn colours too.

Tetsuya lives near the area, so he was a good tour guide too. Tetsuya told me that we would climb two big hills. Those two were fine to me. After the two hills, he asked me if I could still try another hill because we still had time till my appointment with Rolf and Chinatsu to see their baby, Sina-chan. I don't like to say "No" when someone offers me the harder option. Then we went on for it. My positive answer was totally wrong. I saw a sign telling us 'Jigoku-dani Toge (Hell Valley Pass) is ahead'. The pass was a real 'hell'. I ran out all my energy after the hill. Finally I started slipping even on the flat road.

The next week, I had another bike trip with Kaori and Rie. We had a plan to cycle around the same area. But I didn't want to try Jigoku-dani-toge again. I already knew how hard the pass was and I didn't want to get so tired since I had to run in the marathon race the next day. We just cycled in the same area but on the different route. The Tokai Shizen hodo was beautiful. Even beginner cyclists enjoy some parts of it. The pass was very close to the developed area of Osaka, but full of nature. The weather was also beautiful maybe because our daily behaviour was good. The next day, the weather was bad even though our behaviour was not bad at all. We had a cold rain in Nara. Here are the members of 'Team IOC':

Category 10K / Ruth, Peter and Shinobu

Category 5K / Elizabeth and Lisa

Category 3K / Kaori and Junko

Photographer / Mehyaar

Once running, I didn't feel cold at all. The route was full of attraction. We ran all around the historical area of Nara City. We passed by the big gate of Todaiji. It was nice that many people along the course cheered the runners on. That was helpful and I felt as if I were a professional runner like Takahashi Naoko. I didn't train for the race at all, but I enjoyed it and I found running was kind of fun. The best thing was no one in our team dropped out of the races. By the way, we took a picture with Razor Ramon HG. Enjoy the photo!

### **And finally...**

If anyone is thinking of sending in articles for the newsletter, I'd like to request you send them as a **Word attachment** to your email and not in the main body because they are easier to manipulate that way. Please check the website for lots of new and exciting winter sports events in early 2006. See you all next month!



*Stop hanging around Fiona and do some work!*