MY JAPANESE AUTUMN

For Japanese people, autumn is a special time of year when the weather is at its most pleasant and an array of delicious foods come into season. People become more active and exhibit a healthy “autumn appetite.” Fall is referred to interchangeably as the season of culture, the season for sports and the season for the arts. We asked foreign residents living in Japan to tell us about their most memorable experiences of autumn in Japan.

Autumn’s low humidity and moderate temperatures make it a great time to be outside in Japan. The Japanese fondness for autumn sports and the appreciation for cultural activities intersect nicely with a unique event known as yabusame, or traditional Japanese horseback archery. When late November rolls around, my friends and I often head out to watch yabusame performed at the incredibly scenic setting of Kanagawa Prefecture’s Zushi Beach. Here riders in traditional Kamakura Period (1185–1333) costumes race their horses on the sand mere meters from the waves as they compete to hit a variety of different targets.

(NOAM KATZ, U.S.)

Living in the southern part of the Izu Peninsula in Shizuoka Prefecture, one of the surest signs of fall was the arrival of mandarin oranges, or mikan. I lived just a block from a local produce stand that would line up more than a dozen different boxes of mikan every Saturday and Sunday, with one opened orange ready for taste-testing alongside every box. I’d usually buy and eat a dozen before the weekend was out. Now that I’ve moved to Tokyo, I still look forward to the arrival of mikan in the grocery stores every fall, and enjoy finding them lined up by the roadside when I take advantage of the clear fall weather to meander through the pastoral Okutama area on the outer edge of the city. (MICHAEL KANERT, CANADA)

Just about everyone thinks of the leaves changing color as the quintessential image of Japanese autumn. For me, though, the season’s true beauty starts while the leaves are still green, when the first visible shift from summer to autumn happens in the skies. The light changes, the blue becomes richer and amazing cloud formations appear after a typhoon passes. In the autumn of 2011, I was in Ofunato City, Iwate Prefecture, on my third trip volunteering after the Great East Japan Earthquake. The serene natural beauty of the Japanese autumn sky coupled with the hard work and dedication of the people who lived there, determined to rebuild their lives, as well as the volunteers giving their all to help, made an impression that went far beyond the visual realm. It’s something I recall every time I look up at the sky at this time of year. (NAYALAN MOODLEY, SOUTH AFRICA)
Autumn in Japan is a season of colorful leaves and delicious food, but there are also big events like Halloween. Halloween parties are everywhere in Tokyo. People put a lot of effort into making their costumes, putting on makeup, and posing for photos. I went to Shibuya, which hosts the biggest Halloween party in Tokyo. I love the atmosphere where everyone enjoys walking around and talking to each other in colorful costumes such as Japanese anime characters, Disney characters and more. You won’t believe your eyes! In my country, we know about Halloween but we don’t actually celebrate it or hold big events like here in Japan. Under a starry sky, surrounded by dazzling people—it’s like going to Alice’s Wonderland for a night!

(SUPAVITA CHERDCHOOVANIT, THAILAND)

My first foray into Japan was as a student at the University of Tokyo, arriving in late September to a campus warm with the smell of fallen ginkgo nuts, something I had never experienced in England. Stepping absent-mindedly over the sticky smatterings, I didn’t yet appreciate the sickly-sweet odor that would come to remind me inexorably of change. With the crushing heat of summer finally dissipating, greens were giving way to golden yellows, and the promise of Christmas festivities was hanging tantalizingly close. To this older though not much wiser graduate, autumn gives rise to the feeling that something new and interesting waits just around the corner. (ROBERT LEWIS DAY, BRITAIN)

Autumn is such a marvelous time in Japan. The season brings mild temperatures that linger long into December, with sweater weather but plenty of sunny, blue-sky days. The reward for enduring the colder temperatures is the magnificent changing of the leaves.

One of my favorite places to see the fall foliage is Arashiyama in Kyoto. Kyoto is one of the best places in Japan to enjoy beautiful changing leaves, and in autumn Arashiyama’s entire mountainside is ablaze with red, orange, yellow and gold, creating an unforgettable sight. I especially love the monkey park there—the monkeys are running wild. One came up to me and tagged my shoe before running naughtily away. (SELENA HOY, U.S.)