

The Gaijin Ninja

Meet martial arts expert Chris O'Neil, aka Sora.

ROB GILHOOLY

Nagoya Castle, where he works as a member of the seven-strong *ninja-tai* (ninja corps). “They are both travelers with a dislike of boundaries and a desire to be accepted by any culture.”

Gaining that acceptance has been a double-edged sword for O'Neil's two-sided persona.

As a 16-year-old, O'Neil first came to Japan with the aim of fulfilling a long-held dream to see the birthplace of the martial arts that he practiced.

“It was an experience that really changed me,” says O'Neil, who lived in numerous countries growing up, including the United Kingdom. “I was a bit of a rough child, and I had taken up martial arts for self-protection. But the incredible level of politeness and friendliness here had a profound impact on me. It taught me the true meaning of patience and respect.”

That impact was so resounding that ten years later he decided to come back, this time determined that Japan would become his new home.

Having spent several months searching for a job in Tokyo, friends he made there pointed out an advertisement in Nagoya for a



CHRIS O'NEIL

BY night he is Chris O'Neil, a well-traveled, convivial American with a passion for life's uncertainties and *katsu-don* pork cutlet bowls. By day, he is Sora, a rookie ninja who came to Japan with British navigator William Adams¹ in

1600 and was introduced to ninja extraordinaire Hanzo Hattori by shogun Ieyasu Tokugawa.

And just to demonstrate that Sora (literally “Sky”) is the persona he feels more at home with, Chris “Sora” O'Neil leaps toward the heavens and performs a spectacular backflip.

“Sora and Chris are actually quite similar,” says, O'Neil, 30, as he unleashes his sword for a group of smartphone-toting tourists near the Honmaru Palace at

¹ Sailor William Adams (1564–1620) and his second mate Jan Joosten were detained in Japan on arrival and would live in the country for the rest of their lives. Adams would serve as an advisor to the shogun and was given the name Miura Anjin.

job that everyone believed was tailor-made for O'Neil – if it weren't a hoax.

The ad, purportedly placed by the Aichi Prefectural tourist board, was looking for people possessing an array of skills, including an aptitude for backward somersaults, hiding in bushes and hurling star-shaped weapons known as *shuriken*.

They would also need to be comfortable posing for selfie snaps alongside giggling tourists.

"I thought it must be a joke, but when I made inquiries I was told that yes, in fact, they were looking to hire some ninja," says O'Neil. "I thought, yeah, that would be pretty cool."

What he didn't know at the time was the competition he would be facing. Around 230 people reportedly applied for the job, he says. More incredibly, 80 percent of them were foreigners.

When it came to interview, Chris O'Neil, or Sora as he introduced himself, impressed the interview panel so much that they made a special role just for him – the only foreigner to be selected.

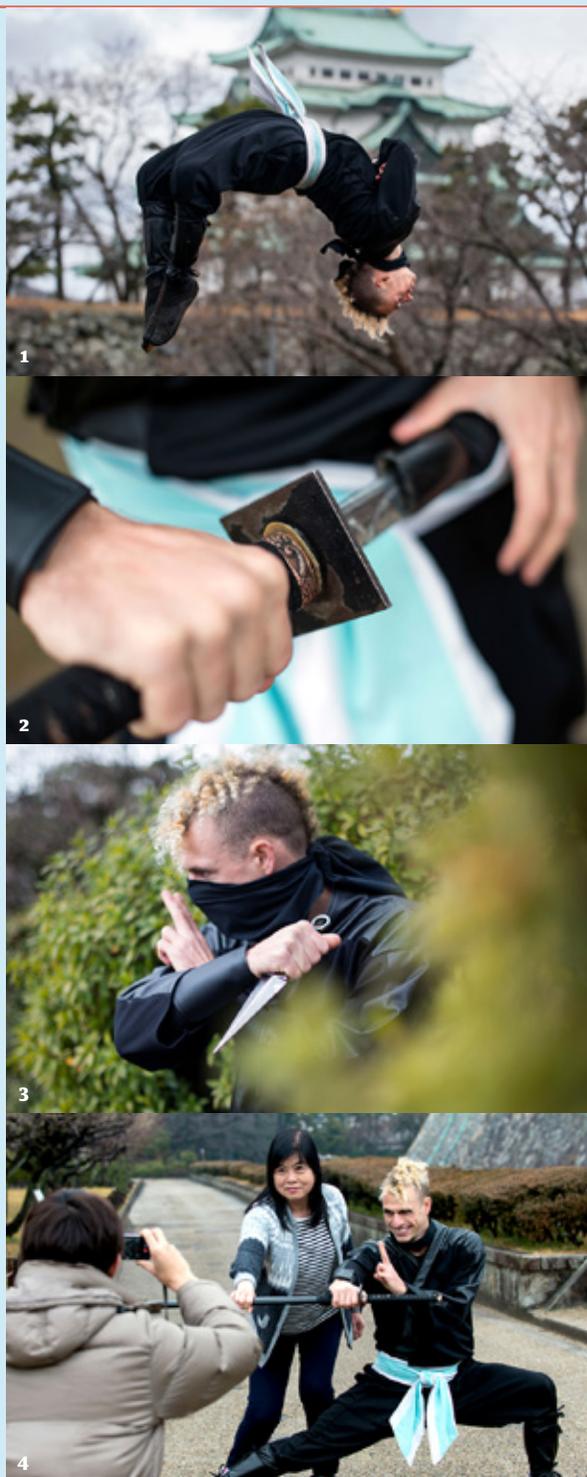
O'Neil's job also entails performing in weekly ninja shows at Nagoya Castle and Nagoya Airport as well as around Japan and overseas. "[Fellow ninja] Hattori is incredible, and he and I are good buddies. I personally prefer Goemon - Japan's Robin Hood - but I wouldn't dream of telling Hattori that."

Part of the problem is that, unlike his counterparts, Sora, like O'Neil himself, is trained in other martial arts, which makes the likes of Tsukikage - Sora's main rival who is the most advanced practitioner of the ninja's art, *ninjutsu* – doubt his commitment.

If they saw him outside work hours, however, when Sora is supposed to turn into Chris O'Neil, they might just change their minds. O'Neil says he has lost count of the times that he has been accosted on the streets of Nagoya and greeted with the joyful exclamation – "It's the gaijin ninja, Sora!" ("Gaijin" means foreigner in Japanese.)

"I love it and always give them a ninja pose," he says. "This really is a dream job for me. It's like going to Disneyland everyday. I never tire of coming into work, putting away Chris O'Neil for the day and turning into Sora." **I**

All photos: Rob Gillhooly



- 1 Chris O'Neil, in his Sora guise, performs a backflip on the grounds of Nagoya Castle.
- 2 O'Neil is armed with a range of "weapons."
- 3 Looking out for the bad guys
- 4 Striking a pose for visitors to Nagoya Castle