



# MIA news

Miyakonojo International Association

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## Life in Colombia (Part 1) — Kodama Tōru, Miyakonojo Fire Department

Hola! Como Estan?

Hi everyone, nice to meet you! My name is Kodama Tōru, and I work in the Fire Department for Miyakonojo City. I'm currently 54 years of age, and this year marks my 30<sup>th</sup> year as a firefighter. Throughout my life, I've been deployed to a great many disaster sites, and had many experiences & been involved in many activities as a firefighter. Most recently, in order to wholeheartedly involve myself in International Exchange & Foreign Aid activities, as well as to experience the reality of being a firefighter overseas with my own eyes, I applied to the JICA (Japan International Cooperation Association) program known as 'The JICA International Dispatch Team', where I spent 2 years volunteering before returning home March this year. I'd like to take this opportunity to share a little of that experience with you all.



Picking Coffee Beans at a local plantation

I was dispatched to the Republic of Colombia in central South America. Commonly known simply as Colombia, it is more accurately located to the north-east of South America, operates as a republican state, and is bordered by Venezuela to the east, Brazil to the south-east, Peru to the south, Ecuador to the south-west, and Panama to the north-west, as well as the Caribbean Sea to the north and the Pacific Ocean to the west. I was dispatched to the Colombian Fire and Disaster Management Agency, where I primarily worked on 'Disaster Prevention & Countermeasures', in particular, hazardous materials and countermeasures regarding incidents of conflagrations in facilities housing such matter, as well as overall advice regarding firefighting techniques and their instruction.

Firstly, I think it would be worthwhile to introduce you



The most popular cuisine in Colombia, Empanada

all to the Colombian lifestyle, traditions & culture. When asked 'What comes to mind when someone asks you about Colombia', is the first thing not coffee? Currently, the amount of coffee beans produced by Colombia is 3<sup>rd</sup>, after Brazil and Vietnam. The cultivation of these coffee beans is centered particularly

around the more mountainous regions. It's thanks to this close proximity that I could drink delicious coffee at work whenever I wanted. Additionally, if I ever asked

for 'tinto' at a shop, I'd get a good cup of black coffee to drink. In Japanese Yen, these would usually go for around the 100 Yen mark. Incidentally, my workmates would all put in a large helping of sugar and make extremely sweet coffee, rather than having it black. I'd of course have another drink of coffee after eating, but if I were to ask for 'Dulce', I'd get a rather sweet dessert to go with it, which became something of a staple. This is one of those situations where I felt that 'there's always space for dessert' is truly a common theme worldwide. On top of this, I began to feel that it was perhaps this habit of eating foods full of sugar that lead both men and women of the area to become so large, causing me to become more cautious about my own eating habits so as to not become any larger myself.

The next thing that likely comes to your mind is soccer, no? I'm sure that everyone has seen scenes of incredibly passionate fans on TV or elsewhere. On occasion, you might see some video of violent behavior bordering on riots. That's exactly what it's like. I felt that the amount of energy the people of Colombia put into supporting soccer is utterly incomparable. Every single open space is used as a soccer field, which surprised even myself while I was there, particularly the sheer number of people. In Japan, baseball is said to be the people's sport, and I felt that soccer is the same for the people of Colombia. From a young age, men and women become familiar with soccer, to the point where no matter your age or gender, everyone is knowledgeable about the rules, and is extraordinarily skilled. I had a number of opportunities to test my own skills with soccer, but I was never even a worthwhile opponent, which left me feeling a little frustrated. On days where there were international matches, things were rather difficult. It felt as if the entire country was out there in support, and work became the next thing in line. In the heart of the city, all the people coming and



A chicken dish known as Gallina, shared with workmates



Cheering on the Colombian National Team in Soccer with some of the locals!

going were outfitted with the Colombian team uniform, and you could hear the sound of car horns and Vuvuzela no matter where you went. You could also see a lot of people displaying the Colombian national flag from the windows of their apartments. It would be enough to have you mistakenly thinking 'is today a festival?' Through this, you can catch a glimpse of the Colombian spirit and cheer, as well as their love for festivals and celebrations.

As I passed the 3 month point since my deployment to Colombia in June of 2018, there was the Soccer World Cup. How wonderful it was that Japan and Colombia were to meet in a match! I'm sure everyone still remembers it well. Of course, that day from the very early morning, it was all about soccer in Colombia. Everyone was out in the middle of town raising the national flag, supporting their team. Not wanting to lose to the Colombian spirit, all of the Japanese nationals stationed in Colombia gathered at the Japanese Embassy to join for the public viewing, but standing in that corner, we quite keenly felt that we were the away team. Even so, Japan and Colombia stood together, their supporters each cheering for their own country. Wasn't it just fantastic when, after all of our support and cheering, Japan managed to claim victory!

However, while we were of course happy to have won, a thought crept into our heads: 'Is this going to be alright? Are we going to be able to walk home? We're in Colombia after all...' After mutually praising each other's team for their valiant efforts, we safely left the embassy. It was then, as I walked home worried, that it happened. After randomly crossing paths with a stern-faced Colombian man, he called out to me 'You're Japanese, right?' All I could think was 'Damn, should I just pretend that I don't understand what he's saying, ignore him and escape? I can't really speak Spanish that well yet... What should I do...' In an instant, he closed the gap between us, and with a great smile on his face said 'Today's match was amazing! Congratulations!', gave me a quick handshake, and hurried on. While truly relieved at the time, I still remember that time fondly. It was a moment that made me consider just how openhearted, friendly and sociable the Colombian people are.



A typical street in Colombia

lack of public order. However, the government has recently become more stable, and from our perspective, left an impression of much-improved law and order compared to the image that we might hold on first arrival. There are police in many locations around the city center, generally keeping their citizens safe from any and all crime. There was also the existence of guns, something that Japanese citizens aren't accustomed to seeing. While you might well expect to see them used by the police, apartment or office security, irrespective of gender, also tend to possess a handgun. In particular, any security force related to banks, ATMs, or that deal with physical cash are armed with rifles or similar sized high-power weapons. Occasionally I would see military forces on guard at certain locations, and what they possess seems even more terrifyingly powerful. It makes for an impressive air of intimidation. However, it's not because of these things that you feel a sense of security. You certainly can't let your guard down. The number of crimes around Colombia is certainly higher than in Japan. Robberies and pickpockets are a daily occurrence.



Law enforcement in Colombia

Allow me to give you an idea of the precautions I took each day in order to ensure I never ran into any trouble. Firstly, I did what I could to make sure I did not appear Japanese. To the locals, being Japanese is synonymous with possessing money. In short, become Colombian. Blend in to your surroundings. Males keep their hair short, and avoid wearing western clothes or anything that looks fancy or resplendent. Wear things that look worn, tired or dirty, and emanate an aura of having no money on you. Don't walk around with any expensive-looking watches, bags or satchels. Of course, don't walk around with your wallet. Each day when you head out, bring with you around 2,000 Yen worth of money, as well as your personal identification in your pocket. If you are out on your own, always be aware of your surroundings, and regularly check behind you. Using your mobile phone whilst out in the middle of town is utterly absurd. Thanks to these measures and some luck, I managed to keep myself from getting wrapped up in anything dangerous. Should you find yourself heading overseas, please keep these things in mind and try to practice them yourself. There is no country around the world as safe as Japan.

...To Be Continued!

 <b>Movies info</b> 	
C-Plaza Cine-port (Tel: 0986-24-2571) 17-9 Nakamachi, Miyakonojo, Miyazaki Map-Code (GPS): 117 488 540*55	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Mottomo Kiken na Yuugi</i> (Japanese)</li> <li>● <i>Satsujin Yuugi</i> (Japanese)</li> <li>● <i>Shokei Yuugi</i> (Japanese)</li> <li>● <i>Spirited Away</i> (Japanese)</li> <li>● <i>Princess Mononoke</i> (Japanese)</li> <li>● <i>Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind</i> (Japanese)</li> <li>● <i>Tales from Earthsea</i> (Japanese)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Mishima Yukio vs. Todai Zenkyoto ~50 Nenme no Shinjitsu~</i> (Japanese)</li> <li>● <i>Stardust Over The Town</i> (Japanese)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*The 1st of every month is ¥1,100 for everyone.</li> <li>*Every Wednesday is 'Ladies' Day', all ladies ¥1,100.</li> <li>*The cinema is closed every Tuesday.</li> <li>*For session times visit: <a href="http://movie.walkerplus.com/th286/schedule.html">http://movie.walkerplus.com/th286/schedule.html</a> (Japanese)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>