

inspiration

A yen to learn

How did a 34-year-old Xhosa-speaking woman wind up teaching English to schoolchildren in Japan? **Paula Slier** spoke to **Ozma Meithwa**.

The first time I walked into Ootone Junior High School in Ootone village, about an hour from Tokyo, I was accosted by a group of wide-eyed, giggling schoolchildren. Take it from me, if you don't enjoy being the star attraction, don't go to Japan!

"There are so few foreigners here that you really stick out," says assistant teacher Ozma Meithwa, a South African sister teaching English in the Land of the Rising Sun. She balances a pile of workbooks in her arms as I place my sneakers in a locker and don a pair of sandals to walk indoors. The Japanese are obsessed with cleanliness. Outside almost every building are sandals in varying sizes for visitors to slip their feet into before going any further.

Born and bred in Queenstown, Eastern Cape, Ozma motions for me to follow her. "People here are really very polite," she says. "They'll go out of their way to help you, especially if you're a foreigner. Children are totally uninhibited – the first time I met the younger ones, they couldn't stop hugging me and pulling at my dreadlocks! When it happened the second time, though, I had to put my foot down and insist it stop." She laughs good-naturedly.

"If you're black, you stick out even more," says Ozma. "But in the two years I've been here, I've experienced no racism whatsoever. Most of the foreigners are from the US, but I've made friends with people from China, Angola, Botswana and, of course, South Africa." She places the pile of books on a desk in the staff room. About 60 teachers are crammed into this long, narrow area. Some are hunched over their marking while others mill about, chatting quietly and sipping thick green tea. In the far corner an elderly principal is making the day's announcements. It's almost 8.50am and Ozma's been up since 6am, catching up on e-mails and preparing her lessons before biking the 20 minutes to school.

"I live in a lovely apartment and I get lots of exercise. My workload's light, so I get home before everyone else. The pupils usually stay at school until 5pm and the teachers don't leave before 7pm. They take their responsibilities very seriously.

"In Japan, teaching isn't just about passing or failing a pupil; teachers see their role as imparting morals and values to the next generation. If a child does something naughty out of school, it gets reported to his or her teacher. Often it's the teacher who responds to an incident before the parents. Teachers here are held in very high esteem."

Even so, Ozma doesn't really want to become a full-time teacher. "I knew before coming here that teaching wasn't for me," she reflects, "and after two years, I still know it – but I love

it to myself and my employers to give it my best shot."

So how exactly does a 34-year-old Xhosa-speaking woman land up thousands of kilometres from home, teaching English in a small Japanese village?

"I needed a change. I felt stuck in a rut in Johannesburg. I saw an ad in the paper for English teachers in Japan, and jumped at the opportunity.

"I've always believed human beings are meant to grow constantly towards something. Success is about being comfortable with where you're going and what you're doing. I spend lots of time planning my life but, while planning is good, things seldom really go according to one's expectations. I've learnt it's not the destination that's important – it's the journey. As long as you're alive, there should be something new for you to discover."

Ozma previously tried her hand at metallurgy engineering and investment banking after studying for an MBA in Holland for 14 months, but decided neither job was for her.

"After I'd lived in Holland, my family hoped the travel bug would be out of my system," she laughs, "but the East has always fascinated me – particularly Japan, because it's so different. The idea of living in harmony with one another and the environment is important to the Japanese, and it's been interesting to see how they've merged tradition with high-tech. I'd seen a couple of samurai movies before I came here and knew a little about the society. I wanted an experience that would take my breath away."

That experience came in the form of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme, also known as JET. Established in 1987 by the Japanese government, it recruits young people from all over the world to help improve the standards of foreign languages being taught in Japanese schools. Participants in this programme act as assistant teachers and while they don't necessarily have to have a qualification in teaching, they must hold a BA degree.

"Before you go on the programme, they send you a million things to minimise the shock of living in such a different society," says Ozma. "You receive books, maps and loads of information. They think of everything."

Once she arrived in Japan, Ozma was linked up with a JET office in a nearby town and, through regular conferences and workshops with other JET participants, she was assured of a support system. More than 30,000 people have been through the programme and at any one time there are close to 6,000 JET teachers around the country, from as far afield as Indonesia, Thailand, China, the Philippines and France.

"English is a second language for most Japanese. The standard is



Photo: Peter Smith



(Above) Ozma teaching English at the Ootone Junior High School, about an hour from Tokyo. (Right) Tokyo, the capital of Japan, where Ozma loved to go as often as possible.



of the English teachers is excellent. The children start learning the language from quite an early age."

In addition to the three to four classes Ozma assists with every day, she helps out at two schools in the afternoons.

"There's a strong emphasis in the programme on cultural exchange. Japan is an island, so occasionally people feel isolated. Their tradition is so rich that they're curious to learn about people from all over the world – their food, dress and celebrations."

Ozma gets asked a lot of personal questions. "The children want to know about my family. Most have never even heard of South Africa, although some know the name Nelson Mandela. Every time I don't go home during vacations, they want to know how my mom feels!"

Towards the end of her two-year sojourn, Ozma started feeling desperately homesick and returned to South Africa just over a year ago.

We're now sitting in her Johannesburg apartment, admiring the collection of books crammed into her shelves. Our shoes have been kicked off and left at the front door.

"A part of me wanted to come back, while another part didn't. Just before I left Japan, one of my classes decided, as a farewell gift, to put on a presentation for me about South Africa. On their own initiative, they listened to *Nkomo Sibisi's Afrika* on the Internet and taught themselves the words and music on their string instruments. I was really touched. It was beautiful. Besides the books and her family, what was it about South Africa that drew her back?"

"You know what I missed the most? Base flesh! It's so normal in South Africa for people to show flesh," she laughs, glancing down at her bare midriff. "People in Japan are very conservative, even in Tokyo."

Her eyes light up at the mention of Tokyo and she jumps up excitedly to fetch her photo albums.

"Tokyo was an hour by train from where I lived. I spent all my free time there," she says. "I learnt enough Japanese to get by. I've also eaten the best Mexican, Thai and Turkish food in the world in Tokyo. I had sobor to die for in a little French restaurant. Like New York, Tokyo is a city that never sleeps. You can go to a night club around midnight and leave at around 5am

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to catch a taxi to another club, or a place for breakfast. The shops open at 6am and they're brilliant – there's such a variety. And the food is also unbelievable: crabs, prawns, fried and boiled... there's a lot more on offer than just sushi. The seafood is the freshest I've ever tasted and the vegetable juices are amazing. The fruits are also different to the ones we have in South Africa."

Tokyo is dotted with beautiful parks and gardens where Ozma whiled away many hours, relaxing and enjoying music. Japanese children are taught at least one musical instrument at school and many continue playing into adulthood.

As for the men, she has no complaints. "They're all very good-looking and well-groomed. And, before you ask, most were my height or taller – and I'm not a short girl!" she chuckles.

One thing she doesn't miss, though, is constantly getting lost. "I remember searching for the South African Embassy in Tokyo for more than two hours. I was looking at this map, but I couldn't read a single word and I was going round in circles. A complete stranger walked me there himself. That's how nice people there are."

"At the end of the day, it's the Japanese who make Japan what it is." ■

• Further information and application forms about the JET programme are available from the Japanese Embassy on tel: (0)21 452-1607 or website: www.japan.go.za/under/aiuti