

*****Happy New Year 2026*****

<Some of this year's photos have video links attached.>

Dear friends,

Happy New Year. Since we got way behind our Christmas letter this year, this is our New Year's greetings. It's been two years since we started living together in our condo in Kaihin Makuhari, Chiba Prefecture.

Kazumi retired in January, so he left Perdue, but rakugo and kobanashi activities have been picking up both in Japan and abroad, keeping him quite busy. In February, he went to Manila, in July to Hikone and Kanazawa, and in October, he was invited by Mr. Haas, a former student of his at Middlebury, to perform rakugo with Master Saryu in Philadelphia. On the technology side, he gave a presentation at a conference at the University of Hawaii with Samet, his last graduate student. He was able to continue playing golf throughout the year with his high school pal. Then, in December, he finally decided to have surgery on his left ankle, which had been hurting for a long time, and had four pins inserted. Next year, he is aiming to make his debut as a rookie in a basketball group for people aged 70+.



Manila



Conference presentation in Honolulu



Philadelphia performance with Nick and Master Saryū



Four pins in Kazumi's ankle

Yukiko continues her cancer treatment. While her condition fluctuates, especially during periods of strong side effects, her QOL is maintained. When she feels well, we take drives around the Bōsō Peninsula, visit roadside stations, or go on short trips together. Overseas travel is difficult due to her hospital appointments, but this year we completed visiting every prefecture of Japan.

In February, we went to Tobu Zoo to see the newborn twin white tiger cubs. They were absolutely adorable. These cubs were featured on the news, and the zoo was making quite a profit off these two little guys.



Also, in early February, we joined a tour visiting southern Hokkaido's tourist spots while going to see the drift ice. Drift ice is a massive ice mass drifting from the Amur River near Russia's Sea of Okhotsk. It usually reaches the eastern coast of Hokkaido around early February, but this year its arrival was unusually late, and we couldn't see any. We were so disappointed that when news came two weeks later that the drift ice had arrived. We immediately took a day-trip bus tour from Sapporo to fulfill our wish. So, our revenge was successful. It was incredible.



Steller's Sea Eagle



Drift Ice



Garinko

In 2024, we toured cherry blossoms from Tohoku to Hokkaido, but since some places weren't in full bloom, this year we decided to “go where they are blooming.” First, in March, we went to see the Kawazu cherry blossoms in Izu. These blossoms bloom earlier than Yoshino cherry trees and feature a deep pink hue. The vibrant 2-kilometer-long avenue of cherry trees was spectacular. In April, we visited Rikugien Garden in Tokyo and famous cherry blossom spots in Chiba. Near Narita Airport's runway lies a cherry grove; the collaboration between landing/taking-off planes and the blossoms is breathtaking. Nagano has many hot springs, so we combined hot spring hopping with cherry blossom viewing. Nagano also has many famous spots where cherry blossoms and ancient castles combine, such as Takato Castle Ruins Park, Matsumoto Castle, and the ruins of Ueda Castle and Komoro Castle. There are also places with sights you won't see elsewhere, like the massive Kobo-yama Tumulus in Matsumoto, covered in cherry blossoms. Also, the weeping cherry tree along the way to Shirahone Hot Springs, likely over 500 years old, was magnificent.



Kawazu Cherry Blossoms



Yoshitaka Weeping Cherry



Matsumoto



Takato Castle Ruins Park



Anyoji Temple Weeping Cherry

At the end of April, we went back to Nagano to see the flowering peaches. Flowering peach trees bloom in various shades of white, pink, and red. While not as well-known as cherry blossoms, the sight of flowering peaches blanketing the hillsides is truly spectacular. This time, we drove extensively on the Chuo Expressway and also visited the Komagatake Ropeway and Narai-juku. Mount Komagatake stands at 2,610 meters (8,618 feet), and while its summit was still covered in snow, we can see Japan's three highest mountains from there. Narai-juku is an Edo-period post town that has become a very popular tourist destination for foreigners today.



Flowering Peach (Achi Village, Nagano Prefecture)

In June, we went to Shimoda in Izu for the Perry Black Ship Tour. Shimoda has a vast hydrangea park that was magnificent. It's larger and more impressive than the one in Kamakura, making it a great hidden gem. After that, at the invitation of my friend Ms. Takahashi, who works at the National Defense Academy, we visited Yokosuka for the first time.



Shimoda Park



Shimoda



Yokosuka Dobuitchi Street



Mikasa

Then, in July, we went on one of this year's main events: a trip to the Yaeyama region in Okinawa. In the Yaeyama Islands, we visited Ishigaki Island, Taketomi Island, Iriomote Island, Yubu Island, and rode a water buffalo cart.



Kabira Bay



Crab



Water Buffalo

In August, we attended another main event: the four major festivals of Tohoku that we'd long wanted to see. We went to Akita's Kanto Festival, Goshogawara's Tachineputa Festival, Aomori's Neputa Festival, and Sendai's Tanabata Festival. The Kanto Festival and Tachineputa Festival were especially spectacular.



Kanto Festival



Tachineputa Festival.



Neputa Festival



Tanabata Festival

In September, we visited famous hot springs such as Shima Onsen, Minakami Onsen, and Tsukioka Onsen. Shima Onsen has a famous hot spring inn called Sekizenkan, which has been in operation since 1694 and even appears in Edo rakugo stories. Tsukioka Onsen has a rare emerald green hot spring. The inn I stayed at in Minakami Onsen had a bath decorated with paintings and mosaics by the famous artist Kiyoshi Yamashita. At Minakami Onsen, we also went to Mt. Tanigawa. The view from the observatory here is spectacular, and it's easy to see why it's a national park.



Shima Onsen



Tsukioka Onsen



Minakami Onsen



Mt. Tanigawa

In October, Ms. Oguchi from Hiroshima University, her son Michi, and her daughter Otoha came to visit, so we went to Mother Farm, a tourist spot in Chiba. In November, we went to see the autumn leaves at Lake Kameyama and Yoro Valley on the Bōsō Peninsula. Also, there was an artistic fireworks display at the beach near our condo. This display featured musical fireworks centered around artistic shells created by Japan's top fireworks artists, winners of the National Award. It was different from ordinary fireworks festivals, with many interesting fireworks launched. In December, we went to Tokyo German Village, famous for its illuminations, and saw a drone show.



Awakuri Fall



Lake Kameyama



Toky Doitsu Village



fireworks in Makuhari

We wish you all a wonderful New Year.

Kazumi & Yukiko

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We wish you a happy 2026.

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