

longform



Leaving Ebisu, we roll KT into her natural habitat: low, flat rice fields. Soon, she is back among her brood. Sun-bleached kei trucks zip along Fukushima's quiet coastal plains. The featureless scenery has an eerie atmosphere, as enormous black bags filled with irradiated soil begin to line the road. In the distance, a gleaming white sea wall looms, and it occurs to Blair and I where we are, and what happened here over a decade ago.

Shades of blue and green

At The Great East Japan Earthquake and Nuclear Disaster Memorial Museum, we meet Rina Nakamura, a local from the nearby town of Futaba. Nakamura was in the Philippines on March 11, 2011. When the nearby nuclear plant began to melt down and Futaba was evacuated, the ensuing chaos and destruction of homes, records and infrastructure meant she was unable to contact her mother for over three months. As if on cue, her mother appears and introduces herself. Cheerful and exceedingly resilient, she was one of the few Fukushima residents who returned to Futaba when the evacuation order was lifted in February 2022.

It's late evening, and the museum is closing. We drive KT to the top of the nearby sea wall. The Pacific, roaring and blue, crashes upon a beach of fine white sand. It looks peculiarly dangerous and uninviting, more akin to an industrial site with its network of buoys strung between stolid ferroconcrete outcrops.

On the horizon, red lights atop the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant's silhouetted towers blink through a veil of late evening sea fog. We stand in silence and survey the scene, trying to wrap our heads around how we're at the sight of the most severe nuclear meltdown since Chernobyl. After a while, I give up trying to comprehend what I'm seeing, climb into KT and set a course for Sendai.

We pull into Tohoku's largest city at dusk, following a growling motorway lined with signs for beef bowl joints, car dealerships and love hotels. The air is hot, drenched in a purple evening haze, and it's dark by the time we pull KT into the gravel parking lot of our guesthouse.

Soon we're on a local train bound for the central city and the bars therein, road beers in hand and two more in our bellies. The next morning, we wake battling hangovers. With 10 minutes to check out, we pile into KT.

Once more we're headed inland, and KT's engine protests as though it knows what we're about to put her through. Miyagi Prefecture's mountains rear up before us, each silhouette a matte shade of pastel blue.

KT disappears deep into these folds. The road markings fall away, and we find ourselves driving slowly and carefully up a single-lane road scarcely wider than a footpath. The cabin glows green from the encroaching forest and fog layers KT in a film of glistening dew. Her engine strains for every meter the green tunnel creeps upward. Then, waterfalls appear on both sides of the eroding tarmac. I'm reminded of how, in Shinto belief, the deep mountains are where the corporeal and spirit worlds intertwine.

A locked gate shatters the illusion, barring KT from leaving the valley and crossing into Yamagata Prefecture. The forest is slightly less magical on the hour-long return, and we rattle slowly downhill in search of the highway.

Morale sinks, yet Blair reminds me that, for all the hours spent in KT's cramped cabin, these detours are part of why we're driving our little green truck and not riding a shinkansen.

The only way to travel

Journey over destination may be a cliché, but it's also part of what inspires travelers across Japan to eschew the nation's high-speed infrastructure in favor of slower, more ponderous adventures.

Haruka Makiuchi and Kanta Sasaki are two such travelers. From April 2022 until July 2023, the couple roamed the length and breadth of Japan in their retrofitted Suzuki Carry kei van. They documented their travels

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The little truck that could

Japan's kei-class vehicles are made for small streets and criss-crossing fields. They're also great for exploring new corners of the country

TALISKER SCOTT HUNTER
OTARU, HOKKAIDO
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Standing at the summit of Hokkaido's highest peak, I'm overcome with relief. It's as though I'd been holding my breath the entire climb up.

The rest of Daisetsuzan, Japan's largest national park, unfurls toward the horizon. Sunbaked mountains colored terra-cotta and dusty green melt into faraway shades of blue, the shadows of clouds drift over their treeless slopes.

Behind me, Mount Asahidake descends into an arid valley, its surface pockmarked by volcanic vents that eventually give way to a sea of greenery. Eventually, the fields turn into the gray mass of Asahikawa, Hokkaido's second-largest city and one of its coldest.

No bears, heatstroke nor breakdowns (emotional or mechanical) have kept me from this, the roof of Japan's north. And, though I can't see it from the summit, somewhere at the foot of the mountain among a thick alpine forest is the little green truck responsible.

"Kei," short for *kei-jidōsha* (light automobile), refers to the smallest class of highway-legal cars in Japan. Recognizable for their compact dimensions and yellow plates, kei cars, trucks and vans can be seen zipping between tight streets and paddies in every corner of the archipelago.

My college flatmate, Blair Masters, and I acquired our little green Daihatsu Hijet kei truck in Niigata Prefecture, 1,300 kilometers south of where we now stand. Five prefectures, seven days, four tanks of gas and one ferry later, we'd pushed the little engine that could into the far north.

Barely exceeding 80 km per hour for the entire journey, we chose to drive a kei truck for many reasons, but among them was a chief desire to see what Japan's ubiquitous well-loved fleet of light vehicles can do. As it happens, they can do quite a lot.

Introducing KT

Jacob Sooy knows kei trucks well. He runs Vans From Japan, a Sacramento-based Japanese vehicle import company. What started as a hobby in 2019 turned into a roaring trade thanks to North American demand for affordable, fuel-efficient Japanese imports. Sooy has since sold Japanese trucks in every U.S. state, including Hawaii and Alaska.

"Kei trucks tick a different box for everybody," says Sooy. "For some, it is pure practicality. The size and capabilities make them ideal workhorses for rural landowners."

Compared to most Western-made vehicles, kei trucks are almost comically small. Yet, these tight dimensions hide undeniable utility. Kei truck trailers are almost the same size as those of a standard American pickup truck, and their durability is practically equal over long distances.

"As long as you are not pushing them too hard, these little trucks will run forever," adds Sooy.

Nonetheless, there is trepidation in the air when Blair and I pick up our truck from Osamu Watanabe, a Saigata-based mechanic who has kindly agreed to rent it to us for the month of August.

Though he supports the journey fully, Watanabe couldn't help but laugh when I first brought the idea up, and he hands us the keys with an air of unease. The truck has already seen well over 150,000 kilometers in addition to many harsh, corrosive Niigata winters.

Concealed rust peaks out between gaps in and outside of the cabin, and the driver's side window won't go down.

"Just don't take it on any highways," he advises.

Cast in the red glow of our tail lights, Watanabe nervously waves us off into the night.

The next day, after hurriedly packing the deceptively roomy trailer with the cheapest, worst-quality camping gear money can buy, we carve up the coast to Nagaoka. To our left, the Sea of Japan sits under a parade of wispy clouds.

"What should we call it?" asks Blair, peering at the dashboard. We consider.

"How about 'Katie?'" I suggest, "Spelled 'KT,' for short."

"Say no more," Blair responds, stashing the first of many ice cream wrappers in the glove compartment. And so our steed is christened.

KT is among friends in Niigata, Japan's foremost producer of rice. The prefecture's roads, stained red from *onsen* (hot spring) water pumped down their centerlines during heavy snowfalls, are home to great fleets of farmers and their kei trucks.

That night, in the company of over a million spectators lining the banks of the Shinano, Japan's longest river, we sit in awe as one of the nation's foremost fireworks displays rattles KT's chassis.

Ears still ringing the following afternoon, we cut an undulating route through southern Tohoku's foothills. Niigata's red roads disappear as oceans of pine and central Fukushima's deep, rough-hewn valleys shape the winding road. KT's little engine groans with each new degree of incline.

The long-suffering truck comes to a halt in Fukushima City at sunset. She sits perched on the top floor of a parking garage while we sit in the trailer, cook a meal on our camping stove and watch throngs of commuters rush in and out of Fukushima Station.

The 10-year-old drifter

"This is awesome!" exclaims Kevin Flynn, a Melbourne-based drift car racer and military driving instructor, surveying KT.

It's mid-morning the next day and we're at Ebisu Circuit, the home and birthplace of

Japanese drifting. Flynn's son, James, screeches round the corner in a custom orange Toyota, enveloping us in a cloud of acrid tire smoke.

At 11 years old, James is already a ranked racer and looks set for a long, fruitful career on the track — though he can only just reach the pedals.

Kevin gives KT the once over, checks her wheels and interior. He knows his cars, so any praise from him carries weight.

"God I want one of these," he says.

Grins plaster our faces while James howls round the corner again. I ask Kevin what he finds so appealing about the truck and he shrugs: "It's just cool."

Kevin owns a kei van back in Australia and is keen to import more for his personal use. He reflects a growing trend among drivers around the world who are slowly recognizing the benefits, practical and otherwise, of Japan's kei fleet.

Vans From Japan's Sooy agrees. "(The kei truck's) popularity is exploding," he says. "As more people import and purchase them, more people see them, want them and buy them."

But why? "Size and fuel economy are probably the primary inherent benefits," Sooy continues, referring to the truck's engine which, on average, consumes half the fuel of a standard American pickup truck over the same distance. Kei trucks are also relatively cheap. Including import fees, the average second-hand truck goes for under \$10,000.

"They're very cheap to repair," adds Blair, a mechanical engineer by trade who eagerly researched kei-class vehicles for weeks before the trip. "The whole thing is mostly mechanical with few electrical components to fail, and very cheap to replace once they break."

He also notes KT's versatility, especially her four-wheel drive functionality, which he says provides "undeserved confidence going off road."

'By road tripping, you can experience true Japanese nature and easily stop wherever you want. It's an excellent way to explore this country.'
YUKA KAMBARA, ROAD TRIP JAPAN

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lifestyle

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name @harukan_tv, amassing some 3,000 followers across both channels.

They're part of Japan's growing community of kei van-based travel influencers, forgoing office jobs and mortgages in favor of adventurous, unpredictable lives on the road.

"I want to enjoy nature more than famous sightseeing spots. To find a way of life for myself (among) places, things and atmospheres," says Makiuchi, explaining why she and her partner both embarked on their year-long odyssey.

They chose their kei van because it was inexpensive and easy to maintain, drive and park. The engine's relative lack of horsepower wasn't necessarily a drawback, not least because it encouraged them to take scenic routes that exposed them to stories and places they'd have otherwise zipped by.

There appears a growing urge among Japanese travelers to seek unbeaten paths that veer away from the nation's comfortable network of trains, hotels and sightseeing hot spots. In 2022, the Japan RV Association found that domestic campervan ownership had almost tripled since 2005.

Toshiya and Yuka Kambara noticed this trend in 2017 and established Road Trip Japan, one of Japan's few suppliers of fully equipped campervans.

"The shinkansen is convenient for reaching popular places, but not so much for very local destinations," says Yuka, adding that Japan is well-equipped for long trips on tarmac.

"The camping sites in Japan have very clean toilets and showers," she says. "Additionally, there are many convenience stores in Japan that also offer clean restroom facilities."

"By road tripping, you can experience true Japanese nature and easily stop wherever you want. ... It's an excellent way to explore this country."

Sleeping rough

After our uncomfortable and long — if not spectacular — detour, Blair and I stagger out of KT and into a pitch-black forest on the outskirts of Yamagata City. There we set up camp and fall into a fearful sleep, serenaded by drift cars racing nearby and the unearthly croaking of dozens of toads.

In the morning, we make a solemn pact to set up camp earlier and be more prepared lest we have to spend the night in any more spooky forests.

The next night, we find ourselves wandering through a wooded hillside on the edge of Akita City at 11 p.m. We'd taken an accidental detour from the train station and were still a 30-minute walk from our campsite, a grassy knoll outside Akita Omoriyama Zoo. Sleep was again elusive thanks to swarms of bulbous ants and a keen fear of curious bears.

Two restless nights in a row make for a joyless drive up to Aomori. We burn through our supply of secondhand CDs by noon and stay transfixed on the road, saying little. Akita's array of offshore wind farms wheel past like a cold steel forest dwarfing the highway and the little green truck striving north.

Along Honshu's west coast, the scenery we'd left behind in Niigata re-establishes itself. The ravages of heavy snows, harsh Siberian winds and scorching summers cause each building we pass to look as though it has stood for centuries as opposed to decades. KT is once again rolling over red-stained roads alongside a sea of other kei trucks. Coastal pines, lashed by sea spray, sit desiccated along a scraggy coastline marred by piles of slowly disintegrating fishing waste.

Aomori Prefecture greets us with a storm. The downpour drums against KT's cabin, drowning out the encroaching thunder and forcing her to trundle through the deluge at a crawl. It is the first bad weather we've encountered since our journey began, and KT handles it well, powering through the wind and rain and arriving in Aomori City spotless.

That night, the storm's fringes make for an excellent sleep aid, providing a steady cool wind that fills our tents.

KT rolls into Aomori's northernmost point, Oma, hours before the Hokkaido ferry is set to depart. Blair and I stroll through the sleepy fishing town. The only passersby we meet are a parade float full of children and a trio of men dressed as samurai heading off for a pre-festival cigarette break.

A handful of the kids rush up to Blair and I to show off their flute-playing while a confident third-grader in sunglasses announces that he can beat box.

"Go on then," I say.

The boy summons his courage then freezes and slinks away, declaring that he's not in the mood. We depart to shouts of "I love you" and "This is a pen," and wheel KT into the bowels of a northbound ferry.

Due north

In Hokkaido, herds of 18-wheelers carrying livestock dwarf KT as they tramp up and down the Oshima Peninsula between Hakodate and Sapporo. We carve a line beside the sea toward a pale range of distant mountains. Gone are Honshu's rice fields. In their stead unfurls an ocean of corn interspersed by bright red barns.

We trundle along noticeably wider roads. The sea fog chases us inland yet through the haze we can see naked hills, no longer covered in the south's thick, steaming greenery. The landscape reminds Blair and I of our native New Zealand, and we cut loose to Shiraoi at an engine-rattling 80 kph.

"KT loves 80!" exclaims Blair, flooring the gas pedal. The engine screams into life, and we barrel down the highway — still being passed by almost everything else on the road.

There are slightly fewer kei trucks in Hokkaido, the islanders seeming to prefer larger engines more capable of speeding between the region's faraway towns.

This isn't to say kei trucks don't thrive in Japan's far north. Over the winter of 2019-20, Bristol-based photographer Charlie Wood, alongside fellow snowboarder Henry Johnson, toured Hokkaido in a second-hand Honda Acry kei truck. The duo built a small cabin in the truck bed and traversed the island's frozen wastes in search of fresh powder.

"It went a long way and performed really well," says Wood, referring to Sabi-chan, their erstwhile tiny home on wheels. "It was super impressive."

"When you're working with something like the kei truck, you have a surprising amount of room but you really have to think how you can use it to your advantage, you have to be smart with the space," he adds. "And that is quintessentially Japanese. ... In the end, it felt right to travel in something so specifically Japanese."

This quintessence is also a big part of why Blair and I had chosen KT for our journey, which was drawing to a close. KT is certainly a novel vehicle, which, according to Sooy, forms a major part of her overseas appeal.

"Own a traditional pickup truck and you're just like everyone else," he says. "Own a kei truck and suddenly you are part of an exclusive group that anybody with \$6,000 can join."

"There are already car shows and clubs dedicated strictly to kei trucks. I have seen companies doing raffles and giveaways of kei trucks, and they're all over social media."

Stephen Tyrell, the Sydney-based founder of the Kei Truck Appreciation Society (KTAS), agrees. "I think initially what catches people's attention is the novelty factor. They turn a lot of heads because of how small and funny they look."

At time of writing, Tyrell's KTAS Instagram account has accumulated some 67,500 followers. On it, he shares content from around the world of kei truck journeys, modifications and stunts.

"When I first saw a kei truck driving on the road, I laughed at how ridiculous it looked in the Australian traffic," Tyrell says. "I love cars that seem like toys so I wanted to learn more. When I dug deeper and actually drove one, I realized they're probably the most versatile vehicles on the planet."

On our penultimate day with KT, Blair and I summit Asahidake. From there, we drive to Sapporo Station and part ways.

Later, Blair would tell me he felt strange on his return flight to Tokyo. We'd experienced so much on our long drive north; camping in parks, eating innumerable roadside cup noodles, and thrashing KT's engine up hills. Then, all he had to do was sit on an airplane for under two hours and he was more or less back where he began.

The fact he could make such light work out of our long, ecstatic — yet no less tiring — kei-odyssey felt discombobulating, and leaves one grappling with what the whole point of the trip actually was.

Before our journey, we'd thought long and hard about how we could find unbeaten paths in Japan. The country is already famously well-traveled, with hordes of tourists, writers and photographers documenting what feels like every nook and cranny. Perhaps the point of our journey with KT was less to find unbeaten paths and more to discover an atypical way to traverse them.

In any case, the old cliché rings true: It's not the destination, but the journey — and our journey was enriched by our kei truck.

Two weeks after bidding farewell to Blair, I wheel the vehicle onto Watanabe's rental lot.

"How was it?" he asks unceremoniously as he retrieves the keys. "Any issues?"

I survey KT one last time. "None," I reply.

Watanabe nods and returns to his office, awaiting the arrival of KT's next driver.



Hong Kong origami fans share in their passion

Design
CAROLINE TAM
HONG KONG
KYODO

Origami enthusiasts across Hong Kong have been organizing monthly meet-ups to share their love of the traditional Japanese art form, which involves folding a single sheet of paper into various decorative shapes and figures.

Created by government employee Matthew Wong, the group provides a welcoming and inclusive space for individuals of all backgrounds and ages to connect, exchange ideas, and indulge in their shared passion for the minimalist craft.

The word "origami" is derived from the Japanese words "ori," meaning "folding," and "kami," meaning "paper."

Wong first stumbled upon the world of origami two decades ago at the age of 6 via the internet. Intrigued by the endless possibilities of transforming ordinary sheets of paper into extraordinary creations, he embarked on a journey of self-discovery, using online resources to teach himself the delicate art form.

Wong's childhood fascination has since evolved into an enduring passion. "Whenever I completed one, I felt a strong sense of accomplishment, and that made me want to pursue even more complicated designs," the 27-year-old says, recalling the countless hours spent honing his skills.

He soon went on to begin making his own creations, with some inspired by Hong Kong culture such as the regional flag featuring the

bauhinia flower, and others with the famous red taxis that can be found throughout the city.

During his university days, Wong started using Instagram to share his creations with others, but found himself wanting to connect even more with individuals who felt a similar fondness for the art form.

In July last year, Wong organized a small gathering with others in his community to give them the chance to learn how to fold new origami patterns, share their latest creations and exchange tips and techniques.

At first, the gathering drew only a handful of participants, but it quickly gained momentum as word spread. By the third meeting, over 60 members were taking part, attracting new creators from a range of different backgrounds.

Each gathering starts with a dedicated volunteer teacher who gives a hands-on tutorial and introduces participants to new techniques by guiding them through the creation of a specific origami model.

Beginners are encouraged to take their first steps into the world of origami, while more experienced folders can showcase their expertise by helping those around them.

After the teaching session, participants unveil their latest origami creations and exchange ideas. They take turns explaining the inspiration for their latest designs, discussing the challenges they encountered during the creative process and sharing the techniques they employed.

Regular attendee Ken Lin, a 15-year-old high schooler, first discovered his excitement for origami in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

After coming across an origami book at home, he was driven by curiosity to recreate

At first, the gathering drew only a handful of participants, but it quickly gained momentum as word spread. By the third meeting, over 60 members were taking part.

the various designs he found within its pages and quickly became enthralled by the craft.

He eventually befriended Wong through Instagram and, two years on, Lin has become a skilled origami artist. He often serves as a volunteer teacher at the meetings.

"To me, origami feels like magic," Lin says. "From a single, unassuming sheet of paper, you can create complex designs."

It has also helped him hone his problem-solving skills and improve his mathematical abilities, which he says has been useful in his studies.

TC Wong, who has been practicing the art form for decades, is another notable presence at meetings. At 60 years old, he has worked as Hong Kong's only full-time origami artist since 2010.

His fascination with origami began through reading craft books in childhood like many other Hong Kong kids who picked up the hobby, but he never dreamed of making it into a career one day. He had been working as an electronics and computer engineer in a factory on the mainland but switched careers upon his return to Hong Kong.

It was tough going at first, but with family support, TC Wong was able to pursue his calling. He now makes a living by running origami workshops and selling handcrafted paper creations.

As the community of origami enthusiasts continues to grow, host Matthew Wong hopes to cultivate a new generation of origami enthusiasts.

"Ultimately, I want to spread the word about origami in Hong Kong and let more people know about this art form, so that origami will become as popular as other common hobbies," he says.

Connecting with nature via paper and pen

Lifestyle
NAKO NOJIMA
KOCHI
KYODO

Nature journaling has become a popular way for city dwellers and other time-strapped people to engage with nature while improving mental health, cultivating curiosity and enriching their minds.

For the unfamiliar, nature journaling is a way of connecting to nature by organizing your observations, questions, explanations and discoveries in the pages of a notebook.

The COVID-19 pandemic helped proliferate the practice via online seminars, and now, more and more people are heading outdoors to gain real-life experiences, which experts say can help reduce stress, improve cognitive function and better equip people to handle challenges in their daily lives.

Eriko Kobayashi is Japan's only nature journaling instructor and a leading proponent of the practice that originated in the United States. She runs one-on-one sessions in Ino, a small town in Kochi Prefecture.

Unlike fieldwork, the main purpose of which is conducting scientific surveys, nature journaling can be enjoyed at one's leisure and with a sense of playfulness, Kobayashi, 53, explains. "It is a tool to connect yourself to nature."

Of the few required materials, most important is a notebook with pens and pencils, a ruler and a magnifying glass.

The practice starts with a stroll through nature, where participants measure objects with a ruler, or express themselves in haiku, poetry or art. No matter how good or bad you are at drawing, it is the process that matters rather than the result, Kobayashi says.

In early October, one of Kobayashi's seminars began in the wooded area with a gentle autumn breeze setting the stage for the task at hand. First, participants wrote down the date, weather and location.

"Imagine zooming in from a globe" to gain context, Kobayashi suggests as she shows the location on a map.

After three minutes of meditation, participants listen and focus in on the surrounding sounds — the buzzing of insects, the chirping of birds. They observe fallen leaves, draw-

ing sketches of their various features in our notebooks. After giving titles to the journal entries, the exercise ends.

Sharpening the senses by immersing yourself in the observed objects in front of your eyes improves concentration and memory, says Kobayashi. Becoming aware of and thinking about the findings and questions that arise is a type of "brain training," she adds.

Nature journaling was conceived by Clare Walker Leslie, a naturalist from the United States. It has diverse uses, including in homeschooling and psychotherapy. A big reason for the recent increase in interest was more people looking for ways to unwind after long periods stuck at home during the pandemic.

Nature journaling clubs have sprung up in Canada, Germany and other countries. According to Kobayashi, there are now about 140 clubs worldwide.

Originally from Tokyo, Kobayashi was introduced to the practice when she stumbled across "Keeping a Nature Journal: Discover a Whole New Way of Seeing the World Around You," one of Leslie's books.

"It's interesting to notice things that you didn't see before," says Kobayashi, who cre-



Above: Nature journaling can help improve your mental health. KYODO

ated a Japanese nature journaling club in 2018.

In the beginning, she would only add a few words to pictures she would sketch during treks outdoors. But before long, she was hooked and began documenting more and more details.

Since moving to Ino in 2020, she has conducted nature journaling seminars as well as training for teachers on the island of Shikoku, the smallest of the four main islands of Japan.

Kobayashi hopes that "through nature journaling, there will be more opportunities for people to notice and question things."