

Plenty of Lessons from Daily Life in Ama in Oki District, Shimane Prefecture (Vol. 1)

In the modern era of expanding globalization, urban areas are full of things, money, and the latest fashions that attract young people. On the other hand, people in Ama, located in the Oki District, Shimane Prefecture, have a good life, even though the town has almost no such attractions. To find out why, I landed at the island by ship after flying from Tokyo.

Volume 1 of the two-part series of articles will intensively cover the jobs and lifestyles of young people who moved to Ama from outside the island.

Volume 2 will introduce the activities of Shimashoku no Terakoya (meaning literally “cooking school for island foods”). This volume will also feature the efforts of the CAS Freezing Center at Furusato Ama Co., Ltd., which sells seafood from Ama throughout the country by introducing the CAS system, which preserves ocean-fresh seafood without damaging its cellular tissues.



Oki Kisen ferry leaving the Hishiura Port

Located about 60 kilometers north of mainland Shimane Prefecture, the Oki Islands comprise approximately 180 small islands that are rich in nature. The largest island, which has an airport, is Dogo, and three other islands—Nishinoshima, Nakanoshima, and Chiburijima—are known as Dozen. The total population of the four islands is around 23,000.

Among these islands, in recent years, the town of Ama on Nakanoshima has an increasing number of people moving in and returning to the town. Indeed, more than 400 people have moved to Ama over the past ten years.



The town of Ama is a local government jurisdiction on a small island of 33.46 square kilometers in area and 89.1 kilometers in circumference. The town was at the brink of financial collapse in the early 2000s. Mr. Michio Yamauchi, who has served as the mayor since 2002, has taken various measures against this crisis. While focusing on administrative and financial reform as well as industrial development, the mayor also actively encouraged people to move to the town, because he thought that town vitalization could not be achieved only by the local residents.

Working Tourism: A new travel style

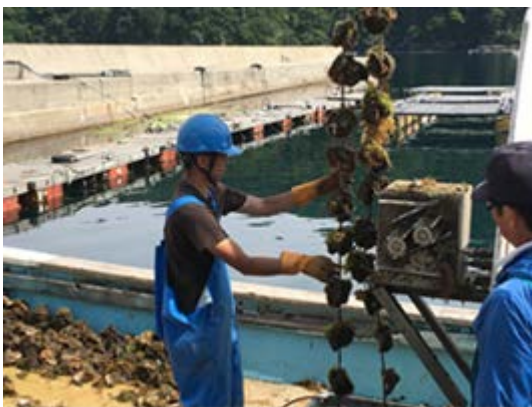
In 2016, the town government launched a new project called Working Tourism. This is a medium- to long-term stay program where people from outside the island are engaged in jobs in the island's core industries during the day, and at night eat and sleep together at a shared house, which is an unoccupied private residence. Jobs available in the town are very diverse, such as tour guides, hotel staff, and industrial laundry workers.

Mr. Akihiko Ota, who has been on the island for four years, is one of the participants in the program. Belonging to the Ama Tourism Association, he works in the town while staying at the shared house. I observed his daily life in the town.



Akihiko Ota

Akihiko is an all-around player who performs various jobs, such as hotel employee and fisherman. In March through May, when oysters are shipped, he works for Ama Oyster Production Co., which cultivates and sells Haruka, a local original oyster brand.



Harvesting oysters



Seaweed and barnacles on oysters

Seaweed and barnacles need to be removed from the harvested oysters before shipment. Akihiko's main task here is to flick the barnacles from the oysters and polish them using a special rotary brush. His whole body becomes floury by the end of the day. Despite such harsh working conditions, there are men and women who work with Akihiko and do their job very energetically. After hearing that two of the men among them are Akihiko's roommates living together in the shared house, I asked them to let me spend a night with them to find out why they came to the town.



A special rotary brush to flick off barnacles



Polished oysters

A shared house where you can find deep bonds

After Akihiko finished his work at the oyster farm at 5 p.m., he drove his two roommates and me to their shared house.

I found the driving very smooth because we did not hit any red lights. They told me that the town has only one traffic light, which was installed in order for children in the town to become familiar with it so that they would not get confused with traffic lights when they go off the island.

Their shared house was a decent two-story private residence that used to be a guest house.



Shared house (for men)

“I will be preparing dinner now. Who is going to take a shower first?” Akihiko, the leader of the shared house, asks his roommates. “Well, I will go first,” says K, a fourth-year college student from

Kagawa Prefecture. K, who came to the island in late March this year, became captivated by Ama and has a desire to work in the town after graduation.

“Then I will cook dinner,” says H, who graduated from college last year and is currently engaged in research activity in a specific field. I wondered why such a scholarly person is working at an oyster farm, and I asked H the reason. He answered, “It is because I was interested in a firsthand look at the actual conditions of the primary sector, which is the foundation of all industries.” I was very surprised at and fascinated by his rich imagination in looking at the primary sector in this age of IT heyday.

They made me a hot pot dish using fresh big springy oysters from their oyster farm. The dinner with them was so delicious, and we had a good conversation.



According to them, about 80 participants in the working tourism program came to the town, just like Akihiko and his roommates. “The most popular reason to come to Ama is that people simply want to experience island life. I think many college students are interested in town development,” explains Akihiko.

I asked them if there are any participants who dropped out and left the island because the oyster farm is stinky and the polishing work is very hard.

“Actually, most people had a gloomy feeling in the first few days at the workplace, but no one has dropped out, ever,” answers Akihiko.

I found that the most important factors in preventing dropouts are the circumstances where participants can spend time with their friends in the shared house, as well as the role of Akihiko, who is a reliable leader.

“No one can be free from stress and fatigue, no matter where they work, and working on an island is no exception. However, the advantage of this program is the strong link between labor and life. This is probably because our life here is fulfilled except for working, or that we can learn a lot from labor on the island. People who have experienced life in Ama are somewhat changed and build human connections before leaving the island. When I travel to Tokyo or Osaka, I meet and enjoy my island friends,” says Akihiko happily, his eyes full of humanity and love for Ama.

Potential demand in local life

Akihiko, who is also a professional photographer, takes pictures of the scenes of local life and his

workplace when he has time to spare from his work. Lastly, I asked him about his future plans. “After spending time in Ama, I realized anew the importance of human connection. There are many large and small islands in Japan. I am currently drawing up a blueprint for a project that enables people in urban areas to access the islands, while the remote islands will also cooperate with one another.”



Akihiko (left, at rear) with his friends at the shared house

The Ama Tourism Association offers the work tourism program to international students and those on working holiday visas to experience life in Ama.

Ama Tourism Association

1365-5 Ama, Oki District, Shimane Prefecture

Tel: 08514-2-0101

Website: <http://oki-ama.org/> (Japanese site only)