

# LINKING THE CULTURES OF KANAZAWA AND GHENT

*Kanazawa in Ishikawa Prefecture has a sister-city relationship with Ghent, Belgium. Rani Verellen, a Coordinator for International Relations, dreams of bringing together the cultures of Japan and Belgium.*



Riding along one of the rivers that flows beside the city of Kanazawa, the woman on the bicycle is reminded of a city in her faraway homeland. The downtown area demarcated by rivers on both sides, the rainy weather, the copious art and culture, and so forth... Given that Kanazawa in Ishikawa Prefecture and Ghent in Belgium—both ancient cities with centuries of history—have much in common, the two have formed a sister-city relationship.

Rani Verellen has been working as a Coordinator for International Relations (CIR) for the JET Programme at the Kanazawa City Office since

the summer of 2019. Born and raised in Belgium, a country with three official languages, she first took an interest in the Japanese language—which is completely different from the Germanic

and Romance languages—after watching anime. Verellen then decided to enroll in Japanese classes at university and spent a year studying in Fukuoka, located in western Japan. Propelled by the

Before joining JET, Rani Verellen was already familiar with many elements of Japanese culture. Here, she performs the tea ceremony. "I've come to realize that the tea ceremony, Japanese archery, and calligraphy are all based on the spirit of Zen."



## RANI VERELLEN

Born in Antwerp, Belgium. Majored in the Japanese language at university out of an interest in Japan born from anime. After studying for one year in Fukuoka, she applied to the JET Programme, which assigned her to Kanazawa in 2019. She continues to work as a CIR there today.



Top: The Saigawa River in Kanazawa. On her days off, Verellen enjoys walking and cycling along its banks. Right: The Higashi Chaya District, founded in the Edo period. The street, which consists of lined-up houses with distinctive latticed windows, is a popular sightseeing spot. KANAZAWA CITY



idea of building a career through her language skills, she was drawn to the JET Programme and the opportunity that it offered to network with JET alumni who now work in many different fields around the world.

As a CIR, Verellen's primary duties include fostering cultural exchange and the sister-city relationship between Kanazawa and Ghent, along with making Kanazawa "linguistically barrier-free" for tourists visiting the city from elsewhere in Japan and abroad. Walking around famous sightseeing spots and cultural facilities in the city, she uses her international perspective to suggest ways to make touring Kanazawa more enjoyable for foreign visitors, such as installing signs with text in foreign languages and pictograms. Verellen said, "It's sad we couldn't welcome visitors during exciting times like Kanazawa Jazz Street and the Kanazawa Marathon because of COVID-19. I'll be happy once the pandemic is under control and the tourists come back." In the meantime,

she helps the many international students at the city's universities by translating important government documents on city life into other languages and providing convenient access with QR codes, thereby offering them peace of mind during their stay in the city.

In Kanazawa, the sea and the mountains are only a short distance away from the city, while historical cityscapes can be found along the narrow streets that branch off from the main avenues. Close to Kenrokuen Garden, where visitors can take in the beauty of a traditional Japanese garden, is the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, one of Japan's leading modern art museums. Verellen said, "One of Kanazawa's charms is that it brings together the city and nature, past and present."

While studying in Fukuoka, Verellen engaged in Japanese archery and the tea ceremony. Then, after being assigned to Kanazawa, she started learning calligraphy and seal engraving. She has also come to take

an interest in the traditional Kanazawa crafts of Kutani ware, Kanazawa lacquerware, and Kaga Yuzen silk dyeing. While eagerly studying various aspects of Japanese culture, Verellen has also come to better appreciate the music, cuisine, and festival culture of her home country of Belgium. "I think a fusion of Japanese and Belgium cultures would be fascinating. I hope my work can help connect our two cultures." ●



Left: Kaga vegetables have been cultivated in Kanazawa since long ago. Verellen said, "I was surprised to learn that every part of Japan has its own local specialties and cuisine, just like the meals you can only make with Kaga vegetables." Right: The D.T. Suzuki Museum, designed by architect TANIGUCHI Yoshio, whose work includes the redesign of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City. Here, the glass and concrete materials express the Zen perspective. It is one of Verellen's favorite spots.

## ABOUT THE JAPAN EXCHANGE AND TEACHING (JET) PROGRAMME



The JET Programme began in 1987 with the goal of promoting grassroots international exchange between Japan and other nations, and is now one of the world's largest international exchange programs. In 2019, the JET Programme welcomed 5,761 participants, and there are currently more than 70,000 alumni from 75 countries living in all parts of the world.

The JET Programme official website >> <http://jetprogramme.org/en/>