

## **Maria Thomson**

Occupation: Japanese Language Teacher (at Tauranga Girls College)

Educational and Employment History (in regards to Japanese): Maria studied at Mount College in Mount Maunganui from Year 9 to 12; in Year 13 going on a year-long exchange to Brazil.

Upon returning to New Zealand, she enrolled at Waikato University. Intending to achieve a BA/MA in order to become an ambassador or diplomat, she decided on a double major in Japanese and Management, as she had always had an interest in Japan but had not had the chance to study it previously.

At university the Japanese course was very intense, especially since the papers Maria took were for those who had never studied the language before. If she had learned Japanese at high school or by correspondence Maria realised that the course would have been far less intense.

Studying Japanese at Waikato University, however, was very enjoyable and Maria thrived in the encouraging environment, where exchanges to Japan and relationships with Japanese students were frequent and fostered.

At the end of Maria's first year at university, she took the opportunity to go and work in Japan with some friends from university over the (New Zealand) summer through the University-organised working exchange programme. She worked at the famous Ozeiwakura Ski Resorts as a waitress in a restaurant, and found that she learned Japanese far more quickly in Japan than when studying at university - simply because she had to learn and be able to function in that environment! Her time spent at the ski resort was very enjoyable - being able to ski for free every day, having free accommodation provided for her and the other thirty students from the university, and meeting so many new people - that she decided to come back on the same programme at the end of her second year. That summer she earned over NZD\$800 per week, as she had a supplementary job as a 'futon girl' (setting out futons for the hotel resort guests) while still continuing her job as a waitress at the resort. Working with Japanese colleagues and spending the majority of her day with Japanese customers, Maria found her Japanese significantly improved. Similarly encouraging was the atmosphere between the Waikato University students: the first-year Japanese students were helped with the language and culture by the second- and third-year students who had worked at the resort before. In such an environment Maria found her love for Japan, its people and its language growing even more.

After graduating from Waikato University with her Bachelor of Arts, Maria went straight back to Japan, this time employed via the JET Programme with the Japanese Ministry of Education. She spent her first year 'team-teaching' English (teaching with a native Japanese) at thirty middle schools in the Kawasaki area. Her second year was spent teaching English again, however this time it was with only two high schools, which she very much enjoyed. From her job with the Ministry, Maria earned around \$60,000 per year; however this was supplemented by her numerous part-time jobs, which she took because of both the people's desperation to learn English, and her desire to have as many different experiences while in Japan as possible. Maria worked at an 'ei-kaiwa' (English conversation) school, and also at a preschool, where she earned NZD\$200 per hour.

Maria then returned to New Zealand and decided to do a secondary teaching diploma, as it would help her in the future with achieving her MA and possibly getting a job as a diplomat. Upon beginning to teach Japanese, however, Maria realised that she loved teaching her students about Japan and its language and culture so much that she decided to stay as a high school teacher. She earned her teaching registration through teaching at intermediate schools and through long-term relief work. Maria received a full-time job the next year at Tauranga Girls' College, where she had formerly been the Japanese relief teacher, and is still fully enjoying teaching there six years on.*profiled by Crystal May-Whitcombe, 2004*