

# sustainable japan

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## From small town to big city to new age of clean tourism

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**Hometown:** Seattle, U.S.  
**Years in Japan:** 2.5

### Leaders & Readers

**JOE MUNTAL**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Mark Choon's career in the hotel industry is of humble beginnings. The son of Korean immigrants to the U.S., Choon grew up in Seattle, where his parents operated several American restaurants. Following a brief stint in real estate after attending university, he moved to a small town in Wisconsin to join his father, who had just ventured into the hotel industry by purchasing a franchised Best Western there.

"The town had a population of around 9,000 people," Choon said, speaking to The Japan Times from The Peninsula Suite, which overlooks Imperial Palace gardens. "The town was so small that when you say take a right turn at the stoplight, and someone asks which stoplight, you have to tell them there's only one."

After learning the ropes of hotel management for four years at his father's hotel, Choon decided to set his sights on bigger career prospects. He thought that if he wanted to elevate his career, he would need to align himself with larger, premium brands. That was when a college friend in Chicago reached out to him and suggested he look for opportunities in the Windy City.

Choon sent his resume to The Peninsula Hotels, which was in the early stages of opening a hotel in the city. He was offered a position as night manager, a position he was initially reluctant to accept. "I couldn't see myself committing to that, but after speaking with several people working there, I decided to take a chance and join the company."

Choon worked at The Peninsula Chicago for nine years in a variety of positions, further learning the ins and outs of hotel management. Commenting on his long stay there, Choon noted the vast opportunities for new knowledge that kept him there. "My philosophy is that if I wake up in the morning and feel there's nothing left to learn, then it's time to move and try something new," he said. "I never had that feeling; there was always something new I could learn."

Choon was presented with the opportunity to work overseas at The Peninsula Bangkok. The assignment marked his first

time living abroad and entailed a significant transition. Nevertheless, he tried to always keep an open mind and learn to apply The Peninsula's service philosophy to his new cultural context. "I went in with the notion that, while I'd be serving in a similar role, I had to go in with an open-minded perspective because I didn't know what to expect," he said.

His second international assignment brought him to Tokyo, where he worked as hotel manager. He had visited Tokyo before in 2007 during a delayed honeymoon trip through Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea. The city had captivated him and his wife during their short stay, and so he was excited by the opportunity to work there. "We fell in love with Tokyo and how old, traditional architecture butts up right against something that's completely contemporary."

Choon only stayed in Tokyo for a little over a year before moving to the Philippines to take over as general manager of The Peninsula Manila. However, he would return four years later in 2019 to assume his current post as The Peninsula Tokyo's general manager.

Little did Choon know at the time, his arrival would precede the COVID-19 pandemic, which would go on to shake the very foundations of the hospitality industry. As a hotel that generally caters to international travelers, the travel bans that accompanied the outbreak struck at the core of the hotel's business. "When I left in 2015, it was really exciting to see our hotel — and Japan's hotel industry in general — which had developed to accommodate a large base of international customers, ride



HIROMICHI MATONO

a wave of growth," he said. "But the pandemic flattened everything."

Despite these setbacks, Choon said the pandemic presented opportunities for his team to refine their business model and expand their range of customers. "We had to learn to do things in a completely different way," he explained. "Our customer base used to be 10% Japanese, 90% international, so we had to reach out to our Japanese customers and ask what we can do better."

In particular, Go To Travel, a campaign by

the national government that offers significant discounts on domestic travel with the aim of boosting economic activity in the wake of the pandemic, played a significant role in helping the hotel expand its brand to a domestic base of customers who were previously unreachable.

In addition to reaching out to more customers, Choon and his team are continuing to pursue the hotel's philosophy of sustainability, building upon their reputation as a leading hotel in sustainable

### Apres work: cycling, vinyl records, skiing

Mark Choon is the general manager of The Peninsula Tokyo. He grew up in Seattle and studied communications at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, later obtaining his Certificate in the Essentials of Hospitality Management from Cornell University. He first joined The Peninsula Hotels in 2001 at The Peninsula Chicago, where he served in various capacities for nine years. In 2010 he was transferred to The Peninsula Bangkok, his first time living abroad. He has since served as the hotel manager of The Peninsula Tokyo and general manager of The Peninsula Manila.

Choon likes to stay active and enjoys working out and cycling. He is also a music lover, and his time in Tokyo has rekindled a passion for vinyl records. One of his favorite places in Japan is Hakuba, where he recently had the chance to stay at a chalet with his family, try his hand at snowboarding and admire the Northern Alps.

luxury, as reflected by their attainment of the internationally recognized EarthCheck Gold Certified status awarded to sustainably minded organizations in the tourism industry.

A recent example of their sustainability initiatives is the introduction of a new line of ecologically minded amenities. The amenities' packaging is 99.9% free of single-use petroleum plastics, and shower caps, toothbrushes and razors that previously used petroleum plastics have been replaced with more sustainable alternatives made from corn starch, wheat, wood and recycled metal.

Reflecting on the past year and his goals going forward, Choon is reminded of his personal motto: "Expect the unexpected." "This motto makes life interesting," he said, "and makes you want to seek out things that are a bit different instead of just staying in your comfort zone."

## Mutsu turns waste into grapes, dolphins and history into tourism

### Satoyama ~ Authentic Japan

**MAIKO MURAOKA**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The city of Mutsu in Aomori Prefecture, at the northern tip of Honshu, has inspiring examples of how a rural city can use its cultural and natural resources to encourage hometown pride in its residents — especially its younger residents — and move visitors to take a deeper interest in the area.

"The key to success is for the private sector to take initiative in various activities, making the activities themselves sustainable," said Mutsu Mayor Soichiro Miyashita in a recent online interview with The Japan Times.

Mutsu covers most of Shimokita Peninsula, an ax-shaped piece of land protruding from the top of Japan's main island. The peninsula itself is designated as Shimokita Geopark, one of the 43 geoparks certified by the Japanese Geoparks Network for their unique and valuable natural resources and landscape.

Among the many ongoing activities related to the geopark, Miyashita introduced two projects that are contributing to the circulation of resources.

The first project makes effective use of the residue that accumulates in baskets used for scallop production. Scallop farming is one of the major industries in Mutsu, and while the residue was formerly incinerated at a cost, it is now being repurposed. "Since two years ago, the residue has been composted and used as fertilizer in vineyards and other local farms," Miyashita said.

The second one turned an area formerly used for raising wild boar into a cattle farm. Composted manure from the farm is also used by local buckwheat farms.

Mutsu is also blessed with natural resources that draw visitors, one of which is the schools of Pacific white-sided dolphins that can be observed in Mutsu Bay around May and June every year. The boats used for dolphin-watching tours carry a guidebook containing detailed information about the ecology of dolphins.

"This guidebook was compiled by the students of the second-smallest elementary school in the city, which has only about a dozen students," Miyashita said. "All the students of the year 2017 participated in making this book, which was a good opportunity to learn about and take pride in their hometown." The book explains the differences between dolphins and whales, male and female dolphins, how dolphins feed themselves, and so on.

Miyashita also pointed out that Mutsu Bay provides an ideal fieldwork environment for researchers because the waves are gentle thanks to the bay's narrow entrance, and dolphins — sometimes more than a hundred of them — can usually be observed from a boat less than 10 minutes after leaving shore. At times they even come so close to shore that one can see them from seaside roads.

Mutsu also offers many historical and cultural attractions. The city has nurtured a special connection with the city of Aizu-wakamatsu in Fukushima Prefecture for more than 150 years. The relationship began when the samurai of the Aizuwakamatsu domain were expelled from their homeland for fighting against the new government's army in the Boshin War, a civil war from 1868 to 1869, and built a new domain named Tonami in Mutsu, farther from the capital.

"We want to focus on people. Learning what kind of talented people have come from this area and how they took part in history will bring new perspectives in historical understanding," Miyashita said, explaining that Mutsu is planning a storytelling event this year featuring the life of Shiba Goro, who grew up in a poor family in Tonami and later became a general of the army.

Shiba took the initiative in communicating with all the embassies in Beijing and protected them in 1900 during the Boxer Rebellion, in which a Chinese secret society attacked foreign embassies and Christians.



**Wild dolphins swimming with Taijima in the background, a symbol of the Wakinosawa area of Mutsu.** CITY OF MUTSU

"He had the view that Japan could only sustain itself through international cooperation. If he had been given a position in the high command of the army, Japan may have decided not to participate in World War II," Miyashita said, stressing that events like this provide opportunities not just to learn but also to think about history.

This storytelling event, in which the historical text "Kita no Dokoku" ("Lament of the North") will be read by a well-known actor, Shinya Owada, will be held on June 19.

This year, together with the Japan Times Satoyama Consortium, Mutsu will co-host the third two-day event on topics related to *satoyama* (mountains and woods used and maintained by area residents) and *satoumi* (marine and coastal environments where people work to maintain biodiversity). The previous event, in the Mie Prefecture city of Shima, was attended by participants from both the public and private sectors, most of them engaged in efforts related to sustainability and regional revitalization. "I hope the inspiring ideas that each participant may have will fuse into bigger and more powerful ones through this event," Miyashita said.

<https://geopark.jp/geopark/>

This section, "Sustainable Japan," features issues related to the environment and a sustainable society. It highlights the satoyama activities of companies and other organizations and also introduces municipalities and local companies promoting the beauty and excellence of the real Japan. For more information, see <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/satoyama> and <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/esg>



**A play chronicling the life of samurai Goro Shiba will be performed in June.** CITY OF MUTSU

**Roundtable:** English-language talk events organized in Japan  
**Sustainability with Ross Rowbury**  
**Date and time:**  
**Wednesday, March 3, 2021**  
10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. : Talk session  
Tuesday, March 2, 5:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m (Pacific Standard Time)  
**Location:** Livestreaming  
To join use the QR code or visit:  
**<https://peatix.com/event/1799734>**



**Leveraging the splendor of Japanese ingredients with Western techniques**



### Guest Marybeth Boller

Marybeth was born to be a chef. After college, legendary chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten put her to work in the Lafayette restaurant in New York's Drake Hotel. Next came the Michelin three-star L'auberge de l'ill in France, the Hotel Martinez in Cannes and the three-star La Gavroche in London, where she worked with Gordon Ramsay. Marybeth returned to New York as executive chef of Lafayette, then sous chef at the casual Nougatine. She ran her own company before being recruited by Bergdorf Goodman to head a modern social salon on the role of executive chef.

Marybeth was also the private chef for Caroline Kennedy. After Kennedy was appointed ambassador to Japan, she asked Marybeth to take over the kitchen at the ambassador's residence in Tokyo; "My style of cooking emphasizes seasonality, simplicity and freshness, so I feel at home here."

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