

My name is Chuck Freedman. I am an RN and also retired from the US Navy. I was stationed at the Naval Hospital in Chatan, Okinawa for 6 years. Two of my hobbies are sea kayaking and the sanshin. I have been paddling for about 20 years and trying to play the sanshin for about 2 years. It is very much a work in progress.

I am very drawn to Okinawa. I have had the happiest times of my life there and went through some major life changes there. I was last there in June 2006 when I paddled up to Amami Island to race in the All Japan Sea Kayak Marathon. I had planned to go back the next year, but a shoulder injury and life events put that on hold. My stepson was accepted into UCLA and June and I moved from Reno to Orange County where I was able to take sanshin classes with Yoko Uezo (Miyagi Nosho). During that time, my 90 year old father moved in with us and moving him from Rochester NY to The OC used up another chance to go back to Okinawa. Last fall we decided to move back to our home in Reno and thus a chance to go back. The logistics of taking care of my father, June's fear of paddling the ocean and her business in Beijing turned this into a solo trip for me.

So, in need of a large dose of Okinawa, I called the Travis Air Force Base flight information line at 8 pm on November 2nd and discovered 2 planes with 130 available seats headed to Okinawa the morning of November 3rd. While I had wanted to go, I had not prepared or even researched much about the Yaeyama Islands. I knew November would be rainy and I would have a constant north wind to contend with. I packed some clothes, a never used tent, sleeping bag, sanshin and notes and The Uchina Maru, my Feathercraft Khatsalano folding kayak and associated gear and June drove me to Travis in the middle of the night, I got on a plane and 2 days later I was at Kadena Air Base.

I had broken a peg on my sanshin on the way over to Okinawa. I made my way out to Gate Dori with John, a retiree I had befriended back in Travis. This was John's first time in Asia and he was interested in going to a few karaoke bars and soba restaurants. I found the Teruya sanshin shop and my sanshin was quickly repaired. The proprietors were pretty surprised to see a foreigner interested in the sanshin. They seemed to be truly impressed with my clumsy picking and my singing that compares with the sounds produced by tortured animals. John and I spent the evening at The Prince Bar. I used to frequent there back in the 1990s.

I had planned to take a ferry from Naha to Ishigaki and return from Miyako. Well, there was no more ferry service from Naha and no ferry between the Yaeyamas and Miyako. I decided to fly from Naha to Ishigaki and hoped that I would not get charged with exorbitant excess baggage fees for the 50 kg of luggage I had with me. (No charge from Naha and only 3000 Yen from Ishigaki). I arrived on Ishigaki on November 7th. My idea was to find a place to get my kayak and gear together. I asked a taxi driver to take me to the port. On the way over, I passed the Matsuri site and then spotted a fishing port in Tonoshiro. The cab driver, bemused but obliging dropped me and my luggage off at the boat ramp. It was around 1 pm when I started to assemble my kayak. There was a grassy spot nearby the ramp where the elderly locals were playing ground golf. I decided that would be my campsite. I had the boat assembled in about an hour and left my gear piled around. I decided to walk over to the festival site for lunch. As I was leaving the boat ramp, I heard taiko and children's voices singing Asadoya Yunta. A group of children were practicing for their performance that night. I grabbed my sanshin and asked if I could jam with them. Had a quick jam and then made my way over to the festival. I picked up a soft, backpack style sanshin case that offered some padding to an instrument that was going to be stuffed inside a kayak again and again over the coming weeks. In the late afternoon, I set up my tent.

I spent the evening at the Matsuri. On stage, the acts were mostly Japanese versions of rock and pop. The last act of the night was Yanawaraba. I had seen these two women on YouTube and really enjoy their music. I was standing over in a corner by myself when a gentleman came over and asked me to sit down. Yoshi, a retired English teacher, handed me a beer and told me he "The Naughty Girls" were his students. I had hoped to be introduced to them, but was invited to Yoshi's house for some aomori. Did a couple of numbers on the sanshin and headed off to a local pub with Yoshi and his wife. I decided to stay in Ishigaki for another day to check out the Okinawan dances that evening. I was up with the sun Sunday morning. I broke camp and packed up the

Uchina Maru. Packing went pretty well. This was going to be a quick test paddle, but I ended up paddling over to Taketomi and back to Tonashi, about 10 miles total. That afternoon, I practiced my sanshin and just hung out. I enjoyed the evening dances and a really nice version of Tsubarama closed out the Matsuri and the evening.

Monday morning was time to start the paddling. My plan would evolve as weather and sea conditions allowed. I planned on being very conservative as far as risk taking was concerned and I stuck to that plan although I definitely raised some eyebrows. My goals were to explore and immerse myself in the Yaeyaman culture and land and seascapes, have fun and to pick up some new sanshin skills. I met those goals. This was the trip of my life... so far.

The paddling itself was great. My route took me to most of the Yaeyama Islands. I missed Yonaguni, Hateruma and Nakanougan Shima. While I was being conservative, the trip was not without mishap: I lost and found my passport on Taketomi Island, A rather large wave broke over me ripping my chart case off my kayak, the digital camera inside was claimed by the sea; my seasock, a rather vital but also redundant piece of safety equipment rapidly disintegrated during the middle part of the trip, and unbeknownst to me until a month later, a Japan Coast Guard helicopter went looking for me after a squall hit as I was paddling from Kohama to Taketomi.

Taketomi:

Taketomi Island has the reputation of being the quintessential Okinawa. My own first impression of the island was of a very beautiful tropical island with a gorgeous Okinawan face and a cold Tokyo heart. I enjoyed cycling around the island, hanging out on the beach, swimming. I hung out with a water buffalo, a Frenchman and some Japanese tourists at the beach and had a great time. My interactions with the locals at the store, bike rental and restaurants however, felt formal and distant, very much like I was in Tokyo. I really enjoyed my afternoon and evening at Kondoi Beach on Taketomi. I chatted with Oliver the Frenchman. He had been traveling on the mainland and Iriomote. He told me he was warned that Okinawa was full of “stupid Americans” and should be avoided. I was the first and only American he met and he was surprised I could speak Japanese, play the sanshin and was traveling by kayak. We were kind of amused at the steady flow of tour vans that would drive up full of passengers, stop and just drive away. One of the cart drivers came by the beach to let his water buffalo take a swim. I paddled by while Oliver took some pictures. We watched the sun set over Kohama, walked into town and parted ways. The next morning, I broke camp at dawn, loaded the Uchina Maru and paddled over to Kohama. I debated returning to Taketomi. While it was a very pretty place, it lacked the warm feelings I had found on the other islands. I decided to head back and despite some initial regret, I am very glad that I did. I returned to Taketomi paddling over from Kohama on a rather squally day. The north wind was fairly strong and the sea state was a bit rough. The wind really picked up while I was crossing over. I landed at Kondoi point a few minutes before the sky opened up and rain began pouring down. A helicopter flew over the beach and hovered for a moment and went off over the island. I figured it was a medevac helicopter taking someone to Ishigaki. A Good Samaritan on Kohama called the Coast Guard after I launched to be on the lookout for me out of concern for my safety. I paddled over to the port, stowed my kayak and gear under a beached catamaran, and went looking for a minshuku in town. I asked a woman at the port office if she could call a minshuku for me. I was rather curtly directed to the map and basically told to “take a hike.” So, I walked into town, a bit lost, but was able to secure lodging at Kohama-So after finding a few other places full. That afternoon, I was ridiculed by some children as I was walking the streets wearing an Okinawan shirt and having an Akabana in my hat. Those little brats actually called me “Ojisan.” I made my plan to head over to Ishigaki, no matter what the weather. My attitude about Taketomi was about to change in a rather ironic way. While I was eating a dinner of taco rice, an American came over and asked if he could join me. He was dressed like a missionary and I was expecting to hear about how he was preaching Christianity and trying to convert the island. Well, Mark Rosa did turn out to be a missionary of sorts. Mark is working on his PhD at Tokyo Daigaku. His doctoral thesis focuses on reviving the Yaeyama writing known as Kaida Writing and also the preservation of the Yaeyama dialects of Taketomi and Yonaguni Islands. Mark is quite fluent in both. I was invited to visit the Kohoin

Shushukan, a small museum the next day and Mark said he would be by in the afternoon to explain things to me in English. I decided to stay another day and check out the museum. At the museum, I was greeted by the curator and owner, Uesuedo-San. He seemed very pleased by the fact I was carrying a sanshin on my back and that Mark Rosa had invited me. Mark is very well known on Taketomi. I explored around the museum while I waited for Mark. My interest was in the sailing sabani and right whale skeleton. I did not know there were small right whales in the Yaeyamas and that I had been paddling in their main stomping grounds. This was also my first time to see a sail rigged sabani. There was lots of ancient pottery, old currencies and coins from the Satsuma period through present day, a display of local dress and fabric weaving and examples of Kaida writing. Mark arrived and started to translate the Kaida. Mark explained how the Yaeyama people had no writing system but created Kaida as a way to keep records without the Satsuma government understanding. He also explained the rope abacus used for tax calculations. The Minsa was also explained to me in detail. The irony that a huge part of Okinawan culture is being kept alive by a skinny bespectacled young man from New Jersey was not lost on Uesuedo-San. He stated we were more Okinawan than the people who lived on the island. Mark explained to me about the pottery made on Panari. I had never heard of Panari, but actually had been there. Panari is the local name for Aragusuku Islands of Uechi and Shimochi. I did not explore the interior of those islands but wished that I had. Mark said it was extremely difficult and expensive to get to Panari. I invited Mark to check out my kayak and consider getting a folding kayak for himself. I said my good bye to Mr. Uesuedo. I left Taketomi the next morning with a new appreciation and a bit of sadness. The museum is struggling financially and there seems to be a lack of interest in its preservation. Taketomi, while preserving an appearance of historical Okinawa, seems to be losing its soul.

Kohama

Up until this point, I just was not sensing the true warmth of Okinawa in the Yaeyama Islands. Yes, people were cordial and friendly. It seemed to me Yoshi was more of an American than Okinawan.

I woke just before sunrise on Taketomi and broke camp, ate some breakfast, packed the Uchina Maru and headed over to Kohama. The wind had come up a bit and I had to fight a bit to keep a westerly direction. Kita Kaze (The North Wind) was going to be a constant companion for the rest of this trip. I covered 10 miles or so in about 3 hours, maybe a bit less. As I approached a beach just to the north of the port, I spotted a couple of people fishing off a man made jetty. As I passed, I was greeted with a loud "ohayo gozaimasu" by the women, dressed ninja style to keep off the sun. I waved back and proceeded to the beach. AS I was setting up my tent, one of women walked down the jetty and warmly welcomed me and inquired about where I had come from. She left after a brief chat and the second woman repeated the actions of the first. The fishing port, full of typical Okinawan fishing boats and motorized sabani was punctuated by "Bob's Café, Located in the Heart of the Yaeyama Islands." As I was getting ready to make my way into the port in search of food and a green phone, I heard a sanshin being played from above the beach. Sanshin on my back, I walked up to a tour bus staging area where one of the drivers was practicing. He was a bit surprised to see a foreigner with a sanshin, but was very happy to let me play along and gave me some tips on Kijimuna. After a short time, he needed to back to work. I went over to the port in search of a green telephone. The first woman from the jetty was working at a desk inside the ferry terminal. I inquired about a pay phone and she just handed me her cell phone. She did not ask where I was calling and did not know me from Adam. But just gave me the phone. Never caught her name but I really knew that I was in Okinawa.

Over my two visits, I befriended quite a few Kohama residents. Mrs. Chinen, the owner of the Silver Restaurant not only fed me plenty of soba and shark tempura, she also had her son, Katsuye, come by and give me sanshin lessons. Through Mrs. Chinen, I met Ricky, a British ex pat and his Japanese wife, Sachiko. They both were working for a large resort on Kohama. We developed a very strong friendship in a short time. I was very taken with Mr. & Mrs. Kubota. This couple had moved down from Honshu in 2006. Their love for life and each other was infectious. Kazuo, the owner of the Ajou Izakaya, kept me buzzed and gave me some sanshin pointers. I did not catch most of the names of the people whom I met, but instantly, I fell in love with Kohama.

After my first night, I decided to stay an extra day. The wind had become violently strong and knocked my tent over. The next morning decided to stick around. Mrs. Chinen suggested the Ufadaki _So minshuku, owned by her sister in law. I had two inn mates that night, a young resident doctor working at the Kohama clinic for a month and a woman who happened to be Peter's (Peter is a Japanese actor who is best known for his role of the fool in Kurosawa's Ran) We played sanshin that night and Peter's sister quickly mastered twinkle twinkle little star.

Ufadaki-So is in the main village of Kohama and named for Mt Ufadaki. The owner sells doughnuts to tourists and her nephew operates a bicycle rickshaw by the port. He was pretty surprised when I told him I had pedaled tourists around on a rickshaw in San Francisco in the late 80s for a part time job. On my last evening on Kohama, I was mesmerized by watching Obasan and her nephew tending the garden just before sunset. I am already making plans to return to Kohama next year.

Hatoma

Hatoma is a small island a few kilometers north of Uehara, Iriomote. I had discussed local conditions with a few of the dive operators on Kohama. Their big concern was the Kohama Channel. They told me the current was very strong and there could be large waves with a north wind. I scouted the Kohama Suido from a lookout on the west of Kohama during a strong north wind and was not overly concerned. I was debating between doing an 18 mile straight paddle outside the reef surrounding Iriomote or transiting the Kohama channel and paddling inside the reef along the shore. I preferred going inside, adding a few miles but adding ample opportunity to get out of the kayak and stretch my legs.

Kiyomi and Peter's sister accompanied me to the port and watched me pack up. The tide was high and the wind was blowing pretty strong from the North. I launched out and headed west inside the reef surrounding Kohama. As I made my way westward, I saw breaking waves along the channel's edges, a bit bigger than I expected but nothing really gnarly. It was an easy crossing across the Kohama channel and inside the reef at Iriomote. I enjoyed both the scenery of Iriomote's northern coast to my left and the scenes of large waves breaking against the reef to my right. At times the water was a bit shallow and I could step out and walk towing the boat. Paddling inside the reef allowed ample opportunity to stretch my legs, empty my bladder and snack. The wind had picked up during the course of the day the wind picked up and the waves were getting much bigger. I was pretty mesmerized by the waves pounding a wrecked fishing vessel. It was around 2pm when I started to close in on Funaura. I cut right to head into Kita Kaze and made my way over to Hatoma. I arrived about 3 pm, and made camp on a beach near the port. After all was secure, I made my way around. I paddled about 20 miles, against current and wind and was getting pretty hungry. I was looking around for a restraint but all were closed until 6pm. A gentleman asked me where I was staying and I told him I set up camp. He informed there was no camping so I went off in search of a minshuku. I found Yumisancha, a minshuku that was made out of old truck trailers and connex boxes. It was run by Yumi, her husband, Kawa and her 19 year old son, Rick. There were chickens and goats running around the fields and an old, overweight yellow lab who like to bark at Hakujin. The room had cooking facilities and a fridge packed with fresh eggs. The folks were a bit puzzled as I had shown up out of the blue, not on the ferry. I arranged my room and told Kawa-san I was walking over to the port to collect some baggage. He insisted on driving me and saw the woman who worked at the port office and inquired about my luggage. I quickly reassured him all was well when she said there was none. I had him stop above the beach. He looked kind of puzzled as he followed me through some brush to my tent and kayak. I told him I had paddled from Ishigaki and had come over from Kohama that day. Back at Yumisancha, the guests were pretty inquisitive regarding my trip. Yumi and Kawasan had moved to Hatoma from Kanagawa. Rick, an awesome musician on both the sanshin and guitar could have been my own son's twin, very similar facial features and mannerisms. Yumi seemed a bit put off at first when I asked if Rick's father was American, but was a bit shocked by the similarity after I showed her a picture of Ben. Rick jammed with me on the sanshin for a bit. After dinner, I went over to Mr. Yonamuri's house. He was an elderly resident and local musician. He was

very glad to hear me play and was giving a rather large ration to his nephew for not playing. The Aomori flowed. Mr. Yonamori sang and played a love song about a man on Hatoma in love with a woman on Iriomote in Yaeyama dialect. I had a blast, but the evening ended abruptly when Mrs. Yonamori called the guys to come in around 930pm. I went back to the minshuku and chatted with the guests and locals for a while before crawling into bed. I stayed another day on Hatoma due to rain and wind. A few of the other guests and I watched Kill Bill and a few other DVD movies. I walked up to the lighthouse and around the port and school. I then realized the day was Friday the 13th and was kind of glad to be holed up and dry.

Iriomote

Said bye to the gang at Yumisancha at the beach and headed toward Uehara with Kita Kaze and intermittent rain at my back. Had a fast paddle, catching a few waves on the ride over. I found a minshuku, Kampeta, that was undergoing kitchen renovation near my landing spot. I had soba for lunch and a couple of the locals gave me a couple of shots of Aomori. I spent the afternoon scouting the beaches between Uehara and Urauchi as part of planning the next day's route. I was awestruck by the beauty of the beaches and was pretty happy that I had an inside the reef passage, or so I thought. I spent the early evening watching a dance and sanshin practice at another minshuku.

I was able to get an early launch from Uehara. I was enjoying my passage through the rock formations and coves along the north coast of Iriomote. I was snapping pictures both of the shoreline and waves. As I came around Unari Point, the waves were breaking against the bluff and there was no more barrier reef. I headed toward the outside of the reef. I decided to stow my camera, which was only weather resistant, not waterproof in my chart case mounted forward of the seat. As I was headed out, a large wall of water built up. I paddled out, expecting to be rolled but came through the impact upright and intact but the chart case was missing. I was able to recover it and my charts but my camera was missing. I made my way into Urauchi Bay feeling very bummed out and pretty ticked off at myself. I had just lost a whole bunch of awesome pictures. I took a break at the mouth of the Urauchi River at the kayak rental and river tour place. I hoped to pick up a disposable film camera but they had none. The nearest place I could buy a digital camera was Ishigaki.

Feeling a bit bummed out, I paddled up the Urauchi River. I paddled past a Japanese couple paddling upstream with their guide from the kayak place. They were a bit surprised how fast I was moving. I paddled upstream to the tour boat dock at the trailhead or Maryudo Falls. I had the trail pretty much to myself for the mile long hike up the trail. At the Falls overlook, there were numerous tourists from the tour boats that had passed me by. I struck up a conversation with a man on vacation from Honshu with his family. They were on a two day tour and going back to Ishigaki that evening to fly home. I hiked back down while conversing with Mr. Fujiwara. Said sayonara and hopped back in the kayak for quick paddle downstream. I stowed the boat on a cement platform under the bridge at the mouth of the Urauchi. Rain was coming so I decided to head back to Uehara and Kampeta for the night. As I was waiting for the bus and attempting to hitch a ride, a tour bus driver parked across the street engaged me in conversation. He was pretty surprised to see I had a sanshin. We talked until a passenger bus came along to take me into Uehara.

Back at Kampeta Minshuku, I struck up a conversation with one of the guests. He had seen my kayak the day before. I told him I had paddled over from Ishigaki and was planning to circumnavigate Iriomote. I saw the blood run out of face. "Abunai!" I have been told of dangerous waters before and have been told I was crazy, but I have never seen someone turn ghostly on me. He explained a couple of paddlers had been killed a couple weeks before off Paimi Point, the SW cape of Iriomote. Southerly currents and north winds clash head on making 20 foot waves common. I checked with a few fisherman and other kayakers and was given a very dire warning to stay away.

The owner of Kampeta gave me a ride back to Urauchi. I purchased some disposable film cameras the night before and was glad to be able to take pics again. Loaded up and headed out of Urauchi Bay. There was a large gentle swell and a fairly gentle Kita Kaze as I turned SW on the open sea. Huge breakers were crashing on the reef. I spotted another paddler closer in to shore than I was. I headed over to say hello. This was a young woman paddling a surf ski. We chatted for a bit and I got a tip on an inexpensive minshuku in Sonai. Although there was a large swell, the channel into Shirahama Bay was calm. As I came into Sonai, there were some nice, surfable waves breaking on a fairly deep reef. I surfed in and decided to check in at Hoshizuna-So and go surf and explore Funauki Bay. By the time I had lunch and walked back to the boat ramp, the surf had died down a bit and the tide was way out, exposing a sharp reef. I went exploring Funauki Bay and went out as far as Saba Saki. I stayed for 3 days. I still was considering rounding Paimi but after getting some local knowledge from a kayak guide, fisherman and from Seiji, the proprietor of a Chinese noodle shop and a sea kayaker in Sonai. I hung out at Hoshizuna-So my first night with a group from Okinawa-Honto. I played some sanshin and got drunk with them. The next morning was rainy and I had some maintenance I needed to do on my boat. I went over to the noodle shop and started talking with Seiji. He and his wife moved from Tokyo about 10 years back. They were raising their two daughters, Sakura and Mikan as Okinawan. Sakura was taking sanshin lessons. Seiji turned out to be a sea kayaker with a pretty nice quiver of boats. He also played sanshin. I later met Sakura and Mikan and was invited to go over to Sakura's sanshin class. Mr. Misao Nane was very gracious to me and extremely patient with the children. The house was beautiful with tatami and sliding paper doors and a very beautiful wood floor. There was the family shrine in the room where sanshin class was held. The kids ranged in age from 6-14 and the older children were pretty serious about playing and the younger kids were running amok. Nane-San just smiled patiently. I was scared the kids would destroy the place. Everyone in the class sang while the older kids played sanshin. At a break, I was played a bit and was invited to join in for Asadoya Yunta and Oji Jiman No Orion Beer. It was a trip hearing kids singing and playing a drinking song. They were really into it and sounded great. Had a blast playing with them and was a bit sad to go back to Hoshizuna-So. At Hoshizuna I met Dr. Tetsuye, a resident physician performing a month of service at the local clinic. We struck up a nice conversation. Tetsuye had been doing malaria research in Africa, a year of undergraduate work in Oklahoma and was going to do some more work/research in Madagascar when he left Iriomote. He gave me a good tip on a place to stay in Ohara called Yamaneko-So.

Next morning the wind was howling, and the rain was coming down in buckets. Well kayaking is a wet sport so I went off and did some more exploring around Funauki Bay and played on a nice break for a while. Saw a dive boat out near the mouth. It was The Miss Unari Zaki, named for the point where I lost my digital camera. The captain was nice enough to take a couple of snapshots of me. I stayed out to watch the surf break off Soto Banare Island and then paddled into Funauki for some lunch before heading back to Sonai.

As I was practicing my sanshin, a man knocked on my door and asked if I knew where the proprietor was. He was looking at me a bit funny then asked "Chuck-San desu ka?" He knew of me from some mutual kayaking friends on Okinawa. I had never met Takeshi Miki before so I was kind of surprised he knew of me. We chatted for a bit until Seichi picked me up for dinner.

Dinner at Seichi's was with 3 other "ex-pat" Japanese families. They were all sick of the pace of life on the mainland and were raising their children as Okinawan. Kind of cool.

Next morning, I got up early; put the Khats in the bag in preparation for a bus ride across the Iriomote to Ohara port. As I finished packing, a gentleman came over and started talking to me. He was a surf ski racer and had been hosting Aihara-San, a Japanese kayak racer. We chatted a bit and I heard Aihara-San was a bit disappointed that I did not come back to Amami. I explained my shoulder dislocation and my retirement from racing. Never getting his name, this paddler gave me and a rain soaked, packed but heavy kayak a ride back to Hoshizuna So. I said bye to Seichi and jumped on a bus with Miki and headed toward Ohara. The bus driver was nice enough to let me off near Yamaneko-So. I left The Uchina Maru on the sidewalk and checked in. I

dropped off my sanshin and some gear and retrieved my kayak and hefted the 80 or so lbs of kayak and gear down to port and over to a small fishing port. In a gentle mist, I let the Khats out of the bag and made the wet pile of rubberized urethane and aluminum into a small seaworthy craft once again. I spent the rest of that afternoon strumming sanshin and patching together my seasock. The sock had lost its urethane waterproof backing so water would seep through. However, it was still ok for keeping sand and debris out and gear inside in case of a wet exit from the kayak.

The next morning dawned fair, sunny with a light northerly wind. I packed a few bottles of water and my sanshin and paddled north to Yubu Island, where water buffalo drawn carts ply the shallow waters between Iriomote and Yubu. The carts are usually packed with tourists and they are serenaded by a sanshin playing driver. I had come in at high tide and was able to get pretty close to the cart staging area. One of the staff came over and told me I would need to pay or leave, but I would need to go over to Iriomote to pay. He took a picture of me by the cart and helped me move the kayak. I unpacked my sanshin and waited my turn for a cart. I went over on a half full cart and instead of being serenaded by a cart driver, this group of Japanese tourists was serenaded by.... me. A young Japanese man recorded this on his digital camera. I asked him to send me a copy and gave him my email but I never received it. I hung around on Yubu for a bit and when I decided to head back to Ohara, the tide was way out and I had a good kilometer of walking over the reef to deeper water before I could paddle back. Paddling back over the reef, I surprised a rather large stingray that made quite the beeline out toward deeper water. I spent the evening drinking and socializing with Yoko, a kayak guide that lived in Yamaneko-So and her Japanese client.

The next morning was rainy and Kita Kaze was announcing himself with a vengeance. I had planned on paddling up the Nakama River and figured a bit of wind would not really bother me. As I was loading up and preparing to launch, a fisherman came over to me and asked about my plans. I told him I was headed up the Nakama and he breathed a noticeable sigh of relief. As I headed out of Ohara Port and into Nakama Bay, I understood why. The wind was blowing 30 knots and the Bay was whipped into a frenzy of whitecaps. I was really pushing to get under the bridge and into the lee of mangroves. Well worth the effort. The rain became intermittent and I saw 7 rainbows on my way upstream. I paddled into several side channels and saw some birds and lots of fish, but missed the elusive Yamaneko, The Iriomote Wildcat. I made my way up the Nakama until the stream became too shallow to navigate. I leisurely made my way back to Ohara. I spent the night chatting with Dr Tetsuye, who had duty the next day at the Ohara Clinic and a Japanese couple from Hokkaido.

I awoke to fair weather and after breakfast, I said my sayonaras to Tetsuye, Yoko and the rest of the gang at Yamaneko. I planned on paddling over to Kurojima via Aragusuku Islands. On my way over, Hateruma was clearly visible to the south, 18 nautical miles away. I was contemplated changing my plan and head down to Japan's southernmost island, but I was not sure if I would be able to paddle back and was a bit worried about my lack of fully functional seasock and mainly lack of a reliable signaling method should I get into trouble. I took a break on Shimochi and decide to figure 8 around Aragusuku. There was very large surf breaking on the reef protecting the east shore of Aragusuku. Once I entered the channel between Shimochi and Uechi, the water became a deep, clear blue. I paddled north along the lee shore of Uechi admiring the coral formations, deep, clear, aquamarine water and white shell covered beaches. After a quick break, it was over to Kuro.

Kuro Island is basically a cattle ranch. 90% of the land is used for raising cows. Once I landed and secured my boat it was off to find food. It took me a while to find a minshuku. I ended up staying at Nankuro and there was group of 20-somethings from Tokyo staying there. I had only paddled about 10 miles and was interested in doing some exploring, so I grabbed my sanshin and walked to the bike rental place. I spent a few hours cycling along and I had stopped for lunch at Ochan Minshuku. Really awesome minyo was playing. The proprietor told me the artist was Shimanaka Hisashi and she arranged a delivery of that particular CD the next day. She was pretty surprised when I picked up a sanshin and played it and asked me to make sure I came the next evening. I rode around the island, avoided a potentially life changing event while picking at a picnic area and returned the

bike. I serenaded Obasan at the jitenshaya and dropped off some provisions at Nankuro. I walked in the fading light to Ochan for a dinner of Gyu-Soba. Kita-Kaze was starting to howl. The air was warm and had a very sweet smell to it. I remember walking by a grave site and thinking 'Yeah, this is heaven right here. I made my way back to Nankuro about 9pm. The young Tokyoans had just started drinking. The owner of Nankuro gave me a beer and asked me in for Aomori. After some introductions, the sanshins came out and the Aomori flowed. This group had a penchant for taking pictures of themselves with their tongues hanging out of their mouths. I thought one of those kids was going to arrest if he drank any more. We all took a midnight stroll to the port where The Uchina Maru was secured. I ended up carrying a young man back to Nankuro and put him to bed.

I was pretty hung over the next morning and just explored. I checked out the sea turtle museum and hung out at the picnic spot for a while playing sanshin. That evening, back at Ochan, I hung out with Takinobu Undou and Hisashi Miyara. Mr. Miyara is a sanshin master and I spent a few hours getting blown away by his hiyabiki and getting lots of encouragement and pointers. Really awesome night!!! . After another awesome walk back to Nankuro, I found there were a few more guests, most notably a loud, obnoxious Japanese man who looked to be the product of conception of Jerry Lewis and Philip Seymour Hoffman. He was actively hitting on a woman guest who just was not enthused. I hung out for a bit but wanted to get some sleep. Well, it was a very loud and late night and I did not get to sleep until 3 am. I was up at 7 and it was raining and foggy. Kohama was about 10 miles away, but visibility was about 1000 feet. While I had plotted a course, and could likely make it over, the amount of ferry traffic from Ishigaki to Ohara concerned me so I decided to stay one more day on Kuro and walked up to Ochan to spend the night. Had a nice nap and a quiet night that allowed me to push against a strong wind to Kohama.

I decided to pack up the Uchina Maru on Taketomi. Kita Kaze turned the channel between Taketomi and Ishigaki into a cauldron and this was expected for 3 more days. I was able to stow the kayak under a beached catamaran and all my gear was dry. Mark Rosa came by to check out the Uchina Maru. I had mentioned how easy it was to get around the Yaeyamas without having to transit through Ishigaki or hire private operators to get to Panari.

I spent a couple days in Ishigaki City getting ready to head home. I pretty much chilled, purchased presents, picked up a new sanshin and did some laundry. I ended up in a minyo bar owned by 川門正彦. . I ended up partying the night away with the Kawajo Clan. I was too hung over the next morning to really do much else. I spent my last evening with Yoshi, said my sayonaras and made my way back to Reno via Kadena, Yokota and Travis.