

The World Character Summit 2023



ONLINE

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All photos by Chris Carlier

THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF JAPANESE MASCOTS

Emily Lovell speaks with Chris Carlier of Mondo Mascots

JAPAN LOVES A mascot, and seemingly has one for just about everything. Hello Kitty, Sanrio's iconic cute cat mascot, became Japan's official ambassador for tourism back in 2008, and each of Japan's 47 prefectures have at least one mascot. Osaka had so many that at one point the Mayor didn't recognise many of them and decided to have a cull!

Known as Yuru-chara (gentle characters) in Japan, these cute (sometimes creepy, often bizarre) characters are an essential part of Japanese culture, adding a sprinkle of charm and a dash of weirdness wherever they waddle.

They're hugely lucrative for tourism, and can rake in huge sums of money for towns, cities and prefectures. Events such as the Yuru-chara Grand Prix event (rebranded as Yuru-verse in 2023) and the World Character Summit boost mascot popularity too, allowing voters to crown a winner from hundreds of characters. In 2010, Kumamon, Kumamoto prefecture's bear mascot, became Yuru-chara's first winner, going on to become a billion-yen bear. Then there's Hikonyan, a samurai cat from Hikone who has supercharged tourism for the castle town since winning in 2011.

So it's no surprise that mascots have exploded across Japan, increasing brand popularity and sales for businesses – everything from

train stations to fridge manufacturers.

And nobody knows mascots better than Chris Carlier, a Brit living in Tokyo who has documented thousands of them since his move to Japan two decades ago. What started as casually photographing fun characters whilst out and about morphed into Mondo Mascots, a blog dedicated to all things mascot, now boasting nearly 200k Twitter followers.

"Tracking down and photographing all sorts of obscure mascots around the country is a bit like bird-watching. It's satisfying to encounter rare or new ones for the first time," says Chris. We caught up about his passion for mascot-spotting, some of his weirder encounters, and whether he can shed some light on who's inside those larger-than-life costumes...

Can you share a bit of background about yourself – when did you first become interested in mascots and what was the inspiration behind starting up Mondo Mascots?

I moved to Japan 20 years ago to teach English, but I was an aspiring cartoonist before that, so I took an interest in all the fun characters everywhere right away. I visited various festivals and tourist spots here, and spotted a lot of mascots in the wild at those places. After a



Chiitan



Kan-chan

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while, I thought I’d give my friends and family a break from the endless online mascot posts, and started separate accounts dedicated to just mascots.

Why do you think mascots are so popular with the public?

Cute and “kawaii” things are popular in Japan, as exemplified by Hello Kitty or Pikachu, and the mascots are an extension of that. Plus, the mascots for towns and cities are a source of regional pride, like supporting the local football team. Everyone has T-shirts, phone cases, and key rings.

What are some of the most loved or popular mascots in Japan? Do you have any personal favourites?

Certainly the most ubiquitous is Kumamon, the mascot for Kumamoto prefecture, who looks like a big black bear, but officially isn’t a bear, but a bear-like monster. In the spirit of regional loyalty, I should say my favourite is my local mascot, Sanchawan, a dog with a tea bowl for a head. I often see him walking around Sangenjaya, my neighbourhood in Tokyo. I’m also a fan of Chiitan, a baby otter fairy who posts anarchic slapstick videos on social media, and Funassyi, a pear fairy from Funabashi City, who sings in a heavy metal band called Charamel.

What are some of the more unusual mascots you’ve come across?

A couple spring to mind. Kan-chan is the mascot for an enema company called Ichijuku, and is a big pink penguin who has the misfortune of resembling an enema and is often mistaken for one. Melon Kuma is the mascot of Yubari City, which is famous for melons and wild bears. The character is a hybrid of both, with a melon head and sharp fangs and teeth, and looks like a terrifying monster that has escaped from a genetics lab.

I’m curious as to what life as a mascot looks like! What sort of things does a mascot have to do?

The identities of the people inside the costumes are shrouded in secrecy, so I’m out of the loop about that. But the mascots tend to appear at various events promoting their towns or companies, where they waddle about for about 20 minutes at a time, posing for photos. Sometimes they’ll appear on stage to dance to their own theme tune. The famous mascots have highly trained professional performers inside, whereas the mascots for small villages and towns are usually a young intern or local teenager.

What do you enjoy most about documenting mascots across Japan? >>>

GLEIPNIR

In anime series *Gleipnir*, Shuichi Kagaya, a teen boy, can transform into a fluffy dog mascot, complete with his own ‘pilot’, who can climb into the lad’s back via a zipper, controlling his movements.

DORAEMON

This character first arrived on the scene in 1969, and since then has become so mind-bogglingly popular in Japan that he was appointed the country’s first official Anime Ambassador in 2008. It’s not the only job he holds – he also became the Global Sustainability Ambassador for UNIQLO.

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Kumamon



Melon Kuma

KIMO-KAWAII

While most mascots are simply sweet, there's a subset of kimo-kawaii, or gross-cute, characters, which include Domo-kun, who is the mascot for NHK and enjoys farting and looking angry.

>>> Tracking down and photographing all sorts of obscure mascots around the country is a bit like bird-watching. It's satisfying to encounter rare or new ones for the first time. Going to different events to see the mascots is also a good opportunity to travel. Reading up on the various regional mascots has been educational for me as well. I've learned a lot about the different places they represent as well as the local wildlife, food, and customs that inspired the character designs.

Do you have any particularly memorable mascot related experiences that stand out for you?

I often go to mascot gatherings and at one of them there were over 400 mascots, and they all gathered for a photo. Quite a sight! I think it was in the Guinness Book of Records.

Can you tell us about some of the big character events?

The World Character Summit is essentially 150 mascots in a car park in Hanyu City, Saitama. The characters all have booths where they pose for photos and sell merchandise, and there are stage performances too. It's a bit like Comic-Con for mascots and is always good fun.

Yuru-verse is the rebranded version of the Yuru-chara Grand Prix, which is an annual online mascot popularity poll, culminating in an event similar to the one I just described, at a different location each year. The last one was in 2020. This year it came back and the winner was Udon Nou, a mascot from Kagawa Prefecture with noodles for brains.

Have you seen any trends or changes in the wonderful world of mascots since you first started documenting them?

Yes, they've become a lot more savvy with social media. The mascots all have accounts on Instagram, YouTube, and other platforms. A new wave of costumed YouTubers is emerging - they aren't mascots for anything, but are independent operators.

And finally, do you have any mascot-related plans for 2024?

I'll keep tracking down and photographing mascots. (Gotta catch 'em all!) I've been putting a book about Japan's mascots together as well, so hopefully I'll finish that and find a publisher. ●



Sanchawan