



A Japanese story

Itahashi Misao on why she started working as a woofers, the good, the bad and why she'd recommend it

Call me Misa, I'm 28 years old and born in Japan. My experience of Australia when I visited as an exchange student at the age of 14, of a laid-back but very enjoyable lifestyle, was something I never forgot, and when I was twice that age I came back to Australia again on a working holiday. The reason I first took up woofing was, to put it bluntly, because I wanted to try my hand at shearing sheep. I'd somehow scraped through a university course on agriculture, and it's certainly true that I was attracted by the sound of such things as permaculture and organic farming, but first and foremost I looked for a woofing job based on a pretty airheaded desire to experience 'real Australian agriculture'. Behind

this idea, I think, lay among other things a memory of the yearning I felt when as a child I watched on TV the anime movie Heidi, the Little Girl of the Alps. I wanted to run forever over the boundless plains with sheep and goats and sheepdogs. To become a woofers, you first have to pay \$50 to the Woofers Association. When you've done that, you get sent a booklet (or sometimes download PDF data) containing a list of farms registered with the Woofers Association. You search there for a farm you'd like to go to, make direct contact via phone or email with the farm's owner, and in that way decide your destination. Instead of receiving pay, you're provided with food and somewhere to live. Essentially, the idea is that you

experience life in some leisurely country town area. Before I started work as a woofers, I worked for six months on a pawpaw farm near the little town of Mareeba near Cairns, mostly doing packing. This was in order to get a second year of working holiday visa. The rule is that in order to apply for this visa you have to work more than 88 days on a farm. I received really good money on this farm, and all my workmates were great people. However, there were production quotas set for packers, and if the supervisor judged that you weren't packing fast enough you could suddenly get fired. In fact, very soon after I started work our packing shed was set a kind of competition to see who'd get fired. I'm small, and not good with my hands, and besides I wasn't yet used to the work, so I was at a real disadvantage, but with the help of my companions I somehow made it through and survived the crisis. This competition lasted about a week, and while it was on the atmosphere in the shed was deadly — no one talked much and everyone was really stressed out and on tenterhooks.

IS WOOFING A DOG'S LIFE?

In the end, one girl and one boy from the shed lost their jobs, as well as another girl's boyfriend who worked in a different work team. I remember vividly how sad it made me to see her spitting out the words "I hate Australia!" Some friends who were working on nearby farms also got the sack and lost their jobs without warning. It wasn't that they weren't serious workers, or were lacking in skill or effort, it's just that from time to time people on working holiday visas are sacked on the spot, at the whim of the owner, if the owner decides that the harvest hasn't gone as well as expected and he needs to reduce staff.



Everyone was working flat out for the sake of getting their visa and making a bit of money to live on.

I was lucky enough to have work, but whenever I heard these stories it gave me a real jolt, and I worried that I too might suddenly lose my job.

Actually, until August 2015 it was possible to get a 2-year working holiday visa even if you worked as a woofers (i.e. without pay). But in September the law changed, and you were obliged to produce a salary payment statement for the period as

evidence that you'd worked for 88 days on a farm. In other words, the only work that was now recognised was paid farm work. This caused everyone who wanted the working holiday visa to pour into this work in a mad rush. It seems to me that

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