

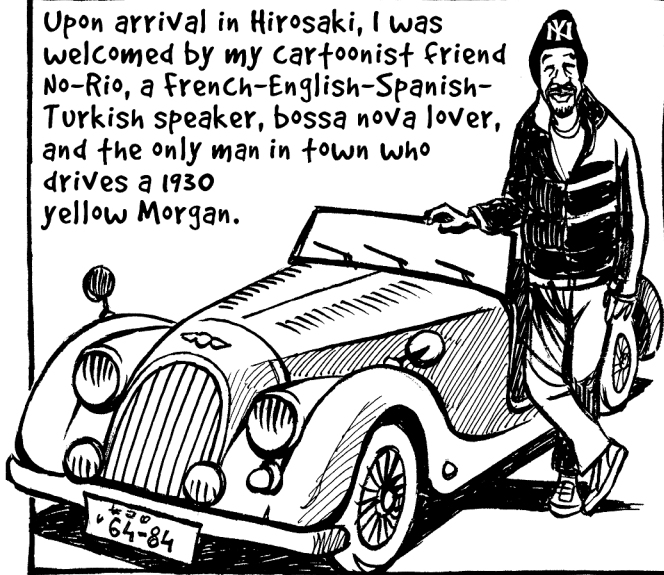
Every year, at the end of April, the little rural town of Hirosaki in Northern Japan makes the national television news. That's when the cherry trees blossom - a sacred time for all Japanese.

CHERRY BLOSSOMS IN HIROSAKI



Locals and tourists gather in the city park to marvel at the myriad little pearls soon to be taken away by the wind. It's also a spectacle of joyous picnics and heavy drinking.

Upon arrival in Hirosaki, I was welcomed by my cartoonist friend No-Rio, a French-English-Spanish-Turkish speaker, bossa nova lover, and the only man in town who drives a 1930 yellow Morgan.



You can never be sure when the trees will blossom. I risked coming all the way from Europe in vain. As it turned out, this year the season came late, and so did the white petals. So much for global warming!

It was a chilly Friday night, but office workers and students from the nearby university invaded the park and decided to celebrate Spring anyway.



A 120-YEAR OLD SOMEI-YOSHINO, THE OLDEST IN JAPAN

For beating the cold, humans have an advantage over flowers: warm sake, served in tents around the park. Root jelly sticks in sweet miso and sea snails are optional...



AFTER YEARS ABROAD, WHEN I CAME BACK TO THE CHERRY BLOSSOMS, I WAS SPEECHLESS WITH EMOTION

ONCE I BROUGHT A FRIEND TO SEE IT AND HE STARTED CRYING

IT'S AN OCCASION TO GREET THE RETURN OF THE GOOD DAYS. PEOPLE WANT TO DRINK, SING AND MAKE LOVE



No-Rio, Makiko (teacher of French), Victor (a US teacher)

With that sorry weather, I decided to change my plans and leave town the next day for buzzing Tokyo. The despicable impatience of the Western mind! On Saturday, just before I left Hirosaki, the weather turned sunny and warm. The smiling season was flowering on everyone's face. The cherry flowers had kept their promise.



HIROSAKI, APRIL 24-28, 2007 CHAPPATTE