

Biz whiz swaps Japan for Q'town

During 18 years living in Japan, Gina Hughes' business became the leading New Zealand intern company in that country, but she ended up feeling "empty". The 42-year-old tells **Philip Chandler** why she's now enjoying living in Queenstown, albeit after first experiencing "reverse culture shock"

MEET YOUR NEIGHBOUR

GINA HUGHES

A SUCCESSFUL Japan-based Kiwi entrepreneur who now lives in Queenstown is doing her bit to solve the resort's crippling staffing crisis.

Gina Hughes, whose business blossomed during 18 years in Japan, despite being a foreigner and a female, will be bringing Japanese interns and working holidaymakers to work in NZ's, and principally Queenstown's, hospo industry.

Growing up in Hamilton, she struggled at high school due to dyslexia — "back in those days, no one knew what dyslexia was, I just thought I was dumb".

Thinking she'd struggle to pass bursary, she left after the sixth form and studied Japanese at Unitec, which offered a scholarship to Japan.

"I said to my dad, 'I'm going to go to Unitec because I'm going to win that scholarship' — I'm, like, quite determined."

Hughes found Japanese, in fact, easier to read than English, due to its pictorial characters, and duly won that year-long scholarship, which not only paid her airfares but also about \$1000 a month.

After returning to Auckland to graduate, she immediately headed back to Japan for a working holiday.

She moved to Fukuoka, on the island of Kyushu, and dated

I was 38, had success, had the money, but didn't have the family I was wanting, and time was ticking

a Japanese surgeon who took her, as his "trophy girlfriend", on tour-group holidays which she thought were "insane".

It inspired her to found a travel agency offering bespoke holidays to NZ.

Contacting Japan's equivalent of NZ Trade & Enterprise, she was told it would be difficult for a foreign woman to obtain a licence.

"When someone tells me it's not possible, I make it possible," Hughes says.

She set up a NZ company at 22 and a Japanese company at 24, and says at networking events there'd be 100 men and "probably four other women".

"I conducted all business meetings in Japanese and managed to raise funds from the local bank to fund my business. "My accountant couldn't speak English, so it was certainly challenging at the beginning."

She lived with the surgeon for three years and they became engaged, but she called it off as she felt he only wanted her to be the trophy wife and have a family.

Hughes says she was approached by vocational schools

to organise NZ internship programmes, which became the focus of her business.

She then connected with an Englishman, whom she lived with for six years, and they also got engaged.

They were due to marry in NZ, at Mount Maunganui, but on the day she picked up her wedding dress, he cancelled it.

Back in Japan, Hughes' company bought an apartment — "I was the guarantor, like, that's unheard of" — and continued to flourish, bringing 200-plus students a year to NZ.

"I was living in a population of five million, and I was the foreign entrepreneur."

However, having ticked off her goals, "I was completely empty".

"I was 38, had success, had the money, but didn't have the family I was wanting, and time was ticking."

Visiting Queenstown to buy accommodation for her students, she again met Language Schools NZ owner Guy Hughes, whom she was an agent for.

"I just tagged along — and the rest is history."

They married in 2019, when she was five months' pregnant, and their child Gigi — a 'G' each for Gina and Guy — turns three next month.

Having lived her adult life in Japan, moving to Queenstown was "reverse culture shock", Gina says.

As it happens, Covid caused her to hibernate her business, leaving her to become a full-time mother.

Now, however, she's re-establishing Gina & Partners, making Queenstown her head office and employing staff here and in Christchurch, Auckland and Japan.

Inspired by Guy's work/life balance, she aims to delegate more and work on rather than in the business.

Next month, her first post-Covid intern arrives, who'll work at The Rees Hotel, and next year she'll be bringing



Helping staffing crisis: Entrepreneur Gina Hughes

over 150-plus Japanese, she estimates — both interns and already-experienced hospo staff.

In view of Queenstown's staffing crisis, "the timing couldn't be better", she admits.

Often asked if she misses Japan, Gina says: "Not in the slightest."

"I'll go back to Japan, of course, like once or twice a

year, but I just love the lifestyle here, it's just easy — I'm here to stay."

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