Interviewers: To get started, could you please introduce yourself and your work? What is your name, what organization are you with, and what does your organization do?

Sil: My name is Sil. I'm originally from Belgium and have been living in Japan for three years.

Kana: And I'm Kana. I was born and raised in Canada and have been living in Japan for five years.

Sil: Together, we are the founders and leaders of "INOW," a social travel enterprise with the mission of creating a more circular, waste-free world.

We view travel as a tool for education and for activating people, not just to learn from what's happening in Kamikatsu, but to take those insights and apply them in their own professional work or communities to tackle the waste crisis.

Kana: To set the context, we're based in Kamikatsu, a rural part of Tokushima, in the mountains. Kamikatsu is the first zero waste village in Japan, which attracts attention from both domestic and international visitors. However, there are very few opportunities to actually learn about what made Kamikatsu what it is today and its journey to becoming a zero-waste community.

When we came here, we really wanted to create a way to share local people's stories, to go beyond just zero waste and recycling. We also wanted to explore how people's relationships with nature, tradition, and community contribute to a broader picture of sustainability and lifestyle.

Sil: When you think about the word zero waste, you might sometimes have a narrow understanding, such as, "I shouldn't buy that plastic-wrapped banana," or "I need to reduce my consumption." And of course, that's definitely part of it. But it's also about how we connect to our environment and our community. It's really about our lifestyles as a whole, and that's what we're trying to show.

Interviewers: Just to follow up on that, when introducing your organization, you mentioned wanting to share the local community's story and Kamikatsu's journey to becoming zero waste. Is that a central part of your educational work?

Sil: Yes, it's central. People come from very different backgrounds, such as designers, architects, waste management experts, and Kamikatsu's journey in developing its intensive recycling system is always one of the first things we introduce. It sets the stage.

Interviewers: We were talking to John, who participated in your program. He mentioned working at the waste station, saying he had to sort trash into 41 categories. Did you consult with experts to figure out how to implement this system?

Kana: Just to clarify, we're not part of the waste station. It's a public facility managed by the local government, which contracts with various recycling companies. For example, the town might approach a paper recycling company and ask, "How many categories can we sort paper

into?" It’s a back-and-forth conversation, and the number of categories can change. Over the last five years, the categories have fluctuated between 40 and 45.

Sil: The system grew organically. Kamikatsu didn’t go from open burning to 40 categories overnight. It started in the 1990s and developed gradually based on what was accessible. Recycling is often limited by technology and infrastructure, and in many parts of the world, even if people want to recycle, they can’t. Here, everything is recycled domestically.

This system isn’t a money-making operation. Waste management is expensive, but if we do the sorting ourselves, the recycling companies can earn more, and we can save money.

When you go to the waste center, there's a lot of transparency. Each category displays how much the town earns or pays per kilogram, where the waste goes, and what it becomes. It's a system that evolved naturally over time.

Interviewers: After sorting, do the recycling companies pick up the waste, or do you deliver it?

Kana: They pick it up, but only when there's enough volume. Clean plastics are collected about once every six months. Batteries, once every three years. Kamikatsu produces much less waste than cities, so pickups are less frequent.

Sil: Residents must bring their own waste to the zero-waste center. There's no household pickup, except for elderly residents, who get a pickup every two months. So, people are used to sorting and storing waste at home in a very organized way. A large part of the waste center is actually used for storage.

Interviewers: I'd like to ask a more personal question. What inspired you to start your company? And when you first came to Kamikatsu, was the community supportive, or was there resistance to outsiders coming in?

Kana: Both of us studied sustainability and tourism in grad school, so this is something we deeply care about. When we arrived in Kamikatsu, we connected with a local person who was born and raised here. She's now part of our team. That relationship helped us establish trust and navigate the personal connections that are so important in rural Japan.

We live here. We make tea, we farm rice. These visible contributions help build relationships with the community.

Sil: Kana moved here first. At that time, there was already another Canadian living here, and our local team member was key to introducing us to others. Originally, our program was more hands-on, like when John participated, helping at the waste station, contributing to local labor shortages.

Financially, that model wasn’t sustainable long-term, so we shifted toward more educational programs. But being involved in the community, such as festivals, harvesting, making rice or tea, that's still an important part of who we are and what we do.

Interviewers: Do you see your model as something that can be replicated in other areas?

Sil: Definitely. In fact, before coming to Kamikatsu, we worked with a university in Girona on a project in Algerian refugee camps where we helped people understand life there and become ambassadors for that reality. We believe our model can be replicated anywhere where people are looking for meaningful, purposeful travel.

Kana: We see ourselves as facilitators, bridging cultural and language gaps. Since we've both spent most of our lives outside Japan, we can help make those connections. The model is replicable, though it's quite intense and might not work for large numbers every month. We focus on meaningful engagement between guests and locals.

For example, we had Thai guests who run an organic market in Chiang Mai. They shared their methods, and local farmers were interested in how they sell their produce. University students from Singapore shared their social design projects, prototypes of their ideas. It was a two-way exchange, not just about guests learning, but also sharing with and inspiring locals.

Interviewers: Could you describe some of the activities you offer, including those beyond the zero-waste initiatives?

Sil: Programs range from one to 10 days. In a one-day program, for example, participants might:

- Hear from local people about how zero waste affects their personal and business lives.
- Visit the Zero Waste Center and take part in a sorting challenge.
- Disassemble large waste items to understand recycling challenges.
- Visit the reuse and upcycling shops.

Depending on the group, they may also:

- Visit local homes to hear residents' experiences.
- Make tea or farm rice together.
- Participate in our Kayabuki school project and *Satoyama*, which explores the connection between people and nature.

Kana: At the Kayabuki School, with "school" being a loose term, as it's not a formal curriculum, but a space for learning. We might harvest or plant rice, gather bamboo to make tools like chopsticks or bowls, or cook rice over a fire using a traditional method called *kamado*. It's about understanding sustainable living from past and present perspectives.

We also visit farmers and explore seasonal agricultural work.

Sil: One young farmer we work with is restoring Satoyama landscapes, planting native trees, and reversing the damage from monoculture forestry.

All of this connects back to a broader understanding of zero waste, how we relate to our environment and communities, and how we choose to live.

Interviewers: Do local people who participate get compensated, or are they volunteers who would like to share their experiences?

Kana: Every relationship is different. We compensate all our "teachers," though some decline payment. For one person, the value of sharing and exchanging stories is more meaningful than money.

Sil: Compensation varies, anywhere from $50 to $200 USD for a 1–2-hour activity. We want locals to feel valued, so we compensate well. There's no tourism infrastructure here, so participation often means residents are taking time out of their daily lives. That exchange matters.

But beyond the money, locals appreciate the chance to connect with people from other countries. It's a rare and meaningful experience in a small village like Kamikatsu. That's a huge motivator for them.

Interviewers: Your website seems geared toward international groups. Do you also work with Japanese universities or high schools?

Kana: We've hosted around 100 Japanese students, including those from Waseda University and local high schools. We're not exclusive, but our programs are in English and fill a gap for international visitors. Most local resources are only available in Japanese.

That said, we've found that when framed thoughtfully, the experience resonates deeply with Japanese students too.

Accessing rural Japan as a foreigner, especially in groups, is hard. We help make that possible. We started with individual travelers, but from a time and financial perspective, it's more sustainable to work with groups, especially schools and universities.

Interviewers: What do you think students get out of the experience?

Sil: We can share some reflection notes if you like, but generally, they experience a mindset shift. One student realized that trash is really about mindset, and how we see and value things. Another student, after their time spent with us, started researching ways to reuse coffee bean waste.

Kana: For many students, SDGs can feel overwhelming. We give them something concrete, like waste, as a way to engage. We also encourage critical reflection. The sorting system is great, but it poses challenges for the elderly. So, we ask: how do we include everyone? It is in ways like this that we encourage reflection.

Sil: It's about giving students a lived experience. Classroom learning is important, but real-world context brings it to life. Success stories can look perfect from afar, but they're often messy and difficult. We want to show the real journey, including the failures and setbacks.

Interviewers: Could you tell us more about how you accommodate guests and teach them how to live in a zero-waste context?

Sil: That is a good question. So, our accommodation model has evolved. We used to have our own homestay for individual travelers, where guests were more deeply integrated into local life. But with group programs now, we had to find a different solution, so we work with a newly built hotel, which is next to the Zero Waste Center.

Kana: We house guests in the *onsen* (hot spring) hotel. Even though it's a hotel, it's still small, only 14 rooms, so the capacity is limited. Also, since Kamikatsu is a small village and we're doing very local, immersive experiences, we cap our group sizes at around 15 people.

Sil: For longer programs, we sometimes split the group into two smaller ones at around 7–8 people each.

We really try to emphasize cultural norms and expectations as part of the program, for example, being on time, dressing appropriately, and respecting local ways of doing things. But the depth of this depends on how long the group is staying.

Interviewers: There's been a lot of talk lately about foreign tourists in Japan not always following local norms. Have you experienced any pushback from the community? Do they ever say, "Okay, 15 people are enough, we don't want more"?

Kana: Actually, Kamikatsu is not a tourist destination, so there hasn't been an influx of visitors. I'd still say it's a pretty open and curious community. People are often intrigued, like, "Who are they? What are they doing here?"

Sil: That said, we try to manage expectations and bridge cultural differences, like punctuality. Locals really value being on time, and sometimes guests from abroad will show up 20 minutes late, and we have to smooth that over. We've also had to explain cultural differences, like appropriate dress. When visiting a farm, even if it's 35°C, people are expected to be fully covered for both safety and cultural reasons. In many Western contexts, shorts and short sleeves with sunscreen would be fine, but that's not acceptable here. So, it's a balance, and part of our job is managing that.

Interviewers: That definitely sounds like a challenge. On the flip side, what are some of the successes you're really proud of?

Kana: I think one big success is that we've brought an international presence to Kamikatsu. Before, people were maybe intimidated or unsure how to engage with foreigners. But now, because we live here and facilitate these interactions, there's been a growing curiosity and openness.

People are beginning to see the value in cross-cultural exchange. It feels like we've become a bridge, connecting people from outside with the local community. That's been one of the most meaningful outcomes.

Sil: We've also seen a lot of growth among local people. At first, they'd say, "No, we can't do that, it's too hard." But we'd gently push them outside their comfort zones. Then, after the experience, they'd say, "Actually, that wasn't so bad. I really enjoyed it. I want to do it again."

It’s helped build a sense of pride and self-confidence. Some locals have said to us, "This is a beautiful organization," because we’re trying to balance the local and the international in a respectful way.

But yes, it’s hard work. One of the challenges is that our work is very relational. People support us because we’re here and they trust us. If we ever left, the organization would struggle to exist in the same way. That’s part of living in a community.

Interviewers: That makes sense. It seems like it would be impossible to run this kind of program without actually living there and being part of the community.

Kana: Absolutely. Larger travel agencies have tried to create similar experiences here, but it hasn’t worked. There’s no local connection or relationship-building, so it falls flat. Locals would ask, "Why are you coming to visit me? Who are your guests?" and it just wouldn’t go anywhere.

Interviewers: That’s helpful. John mentioned a new hotel was recently built. Was that something the community wanted?

Sil: That’s a complex story. The Zero Waste Center has been around for about 20–25 years, in various forms. At one point, the town decided to build a new facility that would also serve as an educational space to attract visitors and promote learning.

Kana: The hotel was added as part of that, with four rooms so it’s very small. If you’ve seen aerial photos, the Zero Waste Center is shaped like a question mark, and the dot is the hotel.

Sil: However, this project was developed without much local involvement. Some people questioned the large financial investment in what they saw as "a place where we bring our trash." So, yes, it was a bit contentious at first.

But over time, people have come to accept it. It’s had a positive impact, though I think it still brings up important questions about leadership, vision, and community involvement. Sometimes those things don’t align right away.

Interviewers: What’s the demographic like in Kamikatsu?

Kana: The population is around 1,300 people, down from around 6000, and over 50% are 65 years or older. Around 30% are over 80. So yes, it’s definitely an aging population.

There are new residents coming in each year, mostly in their 20s, 30s, and 40s. They often come because of work related to zero waste or sustainability. Some are Japanese, some are international. But the influx isn’t enough to offset the population decline.

Sil: That’s actually one of the reasons behind projects like the boutique hotel and creating new businesses to attract younger people. There are efforts to revitalize abandoned properties and support small enterprises, but the impact will take time.

Kana: There are also very few schoolchildren, only 40 or so, and no high school. So, the long-term sustainability is a question.

One idea being explored is attracting people who can live part-time in Kamikatsu, like remote workers or people who have a second home here. That wouldn’t reverse the population trend, but it could help support certain roles seasonally, like during harvest.

Interviewers: Are there many abandoned houses in Kamikatsu?

Sil: Yes, a lot. Tokushima has one of the highest numbers of *akiya* (abandoned homes) in Japan. Some are too far gone, as nature has completely taken over. Others are still livable, but ownership can be complicated. Distant family members don't want to give up the property or go through the process of selling it.

Interviewers: How do you see the importance of your work both in Japan and globally?

Kana: In Japan, rural communities are often overlooked. But there's so much value here. For example, Kamikatsu's tea culture isn't just about tea; it's about tradition, land stewardship, and community values. And all of that connects to the zero-waste philosophy.

Interestingly, our zero-waste system was studied and replicated in a building in Tokyo. So, it's an example of rural areas leading innovation, not just being recipients of it.

Sil: Nationally, Japan still burns about 80% of its waste or sends it to landfill. Recycling rates are low, except for PET bottles. So, Kamikatsu can be a model of valuing resources and doing things differently, even if it's hard to replicate exactly.

Globally, this issue resonates everywhere. People want to reduce waste but don't know where to start. We help inspire them and show that change is possible. We've had Thai organizations set up their own waste centers inspired by Kamikatsu. So, it's not just a local effort, it's part of a global movement.

Interviewers: That reminds me of a documentary I saw about unsafe e-waste practices in low-income countries. How is health and safety managed in Kamikatsu?

Sil: Actually, Kamikatsu used to burn all its waste in open pits until the early 1990s. People, often women, started speaking out due to health concerns. That push, combined with government legislation, led to the current system.

Now, there are strict rules. Electronics, for example, are handled separately. Residents bring them to a collection point, and they're picked up by specialized companies. The waste workers at the Zero Waste Center don't dismantle e-waste or handle anything hazardous.

Kana: Also, waste work in Kamikatsu has a different status. It's seen as a respected job. We've had graduates from Kyoto University come to work here. They're not just "waste pickers," they're *waste educators*. They help residents sort properly, teach newcomers, and raise awareness. It's a powerful shift in perception.

Interviewers: That's such an important point, changing the perception of what it means to work with waste.

Sil: And we make waste visible. In most places, it's hidden, collected at night, and dumped somewhere far away. Here, it's out in the open. You see it, sort it, and engage with it. That visibility is a huge part of the mindset change.

Interviewers: As we wrap up, is there a message you'd like to share with young people?

Sil: You're not alone. A lot of people care about issues like climate change, waste, and inequality, even if it doesn't feel like it. Find those people, connect with them, and build community. That's how we create change.

Kana: Yes, and remember that while collaboration is key, your individual actions also matter. You don't have to solve everything by yourself, but your daily choices do make a difference. We try to show both perspectives in our work.

Interviewers: Is there anything else you'd like to share that we haven't covered?

Kana: Maybe just about the name INOW. It comes from the local dialect. "INOW" means "to return home." We pronounce it "Enou," and we want visitors to feel a sense of home when they come here, connecting with people and values that feel familiar.

A local person might say "INOW" as a farewell, and that's part of the message: come, connect, and feel at home, even if it's your first time here.

Sil: And your focus is social justice and human rights. We don't always use that language explicitly, but it's deeply connected to what we do, around community, equity, sustainability, and systems change.

Interviewers: Thank you both so much. This has been incredibly rich and insightful.