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Diehard otaku display anime cosplay

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For the uninitiated, going to an anime convention like Sakura-Con is a bit like slipping down Lewis Carroll's rabbit hole.

You find yourself in a parallel universe where people have blue hair, carry plastic swords, or have a plastic palm tree sprouting from their head.

Like other fan conventions (think Star Trek or Star Wars), Sakura-Con attracts plenty of people dressed in elaborate costumes as their favorite character from anime, or Japanese animation. About 4,500 people are expected to attend the three days of the convention, or con, for short.

Anime is a stylized genre that's meant for kids and adults. Often infused with science fiction, anime subjects range from comedy to drama, revenge and heroism, magical powers and mystery, and more. Its pulp cousin is manga, Japanese comics or serialized graphic novels. The anime or manga look often features characters with big eyes, lithe figures, pointy chins and, if they're women, big busts.

According to a January article in the Wall Street Journal, anime generated \$495 million in revenue last year, and manga sales totaled \$100 million.

Industry people also point to a 2003 report from the Nielsen Entertainment Marketing Services that identifies anime as the single fastest-growing entertainment niche in North America.

"It probably started with Pokemon -- that's when we saw a lot more Japanese animation on children's programming on TV," said Kelli Blackwell, managing editor of Animerica, a magazine with 50,000 subscribers. "It's definitely going to become more popular."

Fifteen years ago, there were two anime cons in the United States; today, there are nearly 100. A con is like a gathering of a tribe: the fans watch anime, play video games, meet the artists and directors who make the medium, get autographs, parade in a fashion show or a costume contest, buy knicknacks and more. The tribe of anime followers is growing bigger and getting younger all the time.

At Sakura-Con, most of the otaku, as fans are called, range from pre-teens through mid-20s.

"Now that the Cartoon Network and other networks are playing this stuff, the age is going down," says Isaac Alexander, 30, a con volunteer

from Gig Harbor. "I can't believe how many middle-schoolers are coming."

Those would be middle-schoolers such as Chelsea Rabourn, 14, and Amanda Ochoa, 14, who like to be called Chintuki and Tak, respectively. Wearing identical blue wigs and dressed as Rei Ayanami from Neon Genesis Evangelion (yes, it's a mouthful), the friends from Everett were roaming the dealers' tables of merchandise.

"We probably couldn't even count how many anime we like," said Amanda. "We're obsessed."

"We're otaku, majorly," Chelsea concurred.

Chaperoned by an adult friend, the girls had been dropped off for the three-day fan fest by their parents.

"They're just happy that we're interested in something other than boys," Chelsea said.



Jamie Scott, 22, of Selah, shows up as Merle from Escaflone at Sakura-Con (Mike Urban / PI)

At just 18 months, Oceana Layes was probably the youngest fan. Dressed as super sailor mini-moon from the popular "Sailor Moon" series, Oceana was chased around by her equally costumed mother Dalia Layes, 24, and father, Aaron Layes, 22, of Marysville.

"I like the cosplay part of it," said Dalia Layes. "I get to vent my creativity because you can't buy any of these costumes at the store."

Cosplay, for the newbies (myself included), is a Japlish (hybrid Japanese-English words) term for costume play, or dress-up, the hallmark of the con world.

In the first few hours that Sionna Klassen walked around Sakura-Con, more than 50 people snapped her picture. Transformed into Seiryuunomiko, a priestess of the dragon God in a serial called "Fushiyuugi," Klassen had spent more than 80 hours and several hundred dollars making her elaborate costume, which included horns made of paper clay and wire. She's been going to cons for nine years and learned to sew just to make her costumes.

She said people outside the con world assume it's a bastion of geekdom, but she sees it as a positive community with a shared interest.