

JSPS Fellow's Experience

Fellow: Terry John Evans
Host: Professor Shunichi Takeda
Host Institution: Department of Radiation Genetics
Graduate School of Medicine
Kyoto University

I undertook an 8-month JSPS Short-term Postdoctoral Fellowship at Kyoto University, in Prof Takeda's Department of Radiation Genetics. Prof Takeda investigates DNA repair processes in cultured chicken cells. Various repair pathways exist, and different ones are used depending on the type of DNA damage that has occurred. This is clinically relevant because cancer cells are usually defective in these repair pathways, and cancers can be classified according to the nature of their repair defect. This has implications for the rational treatment of these cancers. All the molecular techniques I needed were well established in the lab, which was helpful for such a time-limited research project. The lab is very well equipped and well staffed.

Applying for a JSPS fellowship can be a long process. Some of my documents had to be sent to Japan in hard copy (I applied directly to the Tokyo office), and this can slow things down considerably. Prof Takeda and his secretary, Fukuma-san, were excellent in providing me with everything I needed, seemingly instantly. If only academics in Britain were as efficient! Administrative procedures within Japan could sometimes be frustrating, but they always happened to time.

The Japanese have a reputation for working hard. This is undeniably true, and mixed with my ambition to obtain enough data for a publication during my short stay, I spent more time in the lab than I would have liked. Eukaryotic genetics is much harder work than bacterial genetics (the topic of my PhD) and this came as a shock to me. However, I learned a phenomenal amount, and scientifically, my Fellowship was excellent.

Prof. Takeda has an incredibly international outlook, and he has collaborators all over the world. His laboratory is quite special in using English as a main language. Of course, learning Japanese is nonetheless massively beneficial.

Foreigners are very well cared for by their Japanese hosts. I found that there was always someone on hand to help me open a bank account, register as a

foreign citizen, or find accommodation (international houses for foreigners are the simplest option for short stays). This was a real godsend.

Kyoto University organizes regular events for international members, including a weekly party. Additionally, I enjoyed learning cookery, calligraphy and traditional cloth dying thanks to Kyoto International Community House and Kyoto Culture Circle.

The Japanese relax by celebrating their culture. A week doesn't pass without an indescribably beautiful festival in or around Kyoto – on a lake, at night with fire and fireworks, re-enacting an ancient parade... Many of Japan's most famous tourist attractions are in Kyoto, along with geisha houses, lots of shopping, coffee shops and bars on offer, too. It's a busy city but easily navigable by bike, and hectic Osaka is just half an hour away.

The quirks and delights of Japan are too numerous to list, but for living and working, Kyoto is practical, beautiful and inspiring. I'm incredibly grateful to Prof. Takeda and the friends there for having made my Fellowship so memorable.

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Left: the rising sun, from the summit of Mount Fuji.

Right: feeding the deer outside Todai-ji temple, Nara – home to the world's largest Buddha.