

Although I had completed my PhD, there were several questions left to investigate that would take me into areas of biology new to me. Moreover, after spending both my undergraduate and graduate studies in Cambridge I longed for a change of scene. I brought these two desires together by visiting the RIKEN Center for Developmental Biology (CDB) in Kobe. I approached Professor Shinichi Nishikawa, the original developer of the protocol for stem cell differentiation that I wanted to use, who was very receptive and agreed to host me to carry out my proposed experiment. I spent four months testing the ability of various mutant mouse embryonic stem cells, which I generated during my PhD, to differentiate into mesodermal cells.

The CDB proved a fantastic place to work, with excellent facilities for the experiments I wanted to do and lots of help and advice from the Nishikawa group. Although the institute is very international in Japanese terms, there are far fewer foreign researchers than in labs in the UK. Nevertheless, connections to the wider world of science were strong, with a great selection of visitors giving seminars and various conferences and meetings that I was able to attend.

The Institute has a dedicated international team to help foreign staff settle in. I was given details of an American landlord in Kobe, with whom I arranged an apartment to rent – something that can be difficult when only going for a short time. They also helped me to open a bank account, get a phone and myriad other things, with the happy result that I have absolutely no stories about things going wrong!

With everyone at work speaking English I had to try surprisingly hard to get opportunities to speak Japanese. I made a special effort to learn to read menus, which paid dividends and allowed me to make the most of the amazing range of food on offer everywhere. Cycling home each night through the bar and restaurant district of Sannomiya it was hard not to get distracted by something tasty! I quickly found that the Japanese love eating and drinking, and enjoyed visiting many restaurants and izakaya with my new colleagues and friends.

With a short project and a tight schedule I didn't have too many opportunities to travel in Japan, although fortunately there is more than enough to see on short trips to Osaka and Kyoto to fill four months. Life is so different that you can have an adventure just doing everyday things in your home town. Kobe itself is a nice city – I was lucky to be living in the old foreigner district, which is full of New England style buildings and Japanese wedding parties. I did take full advantage of the opportunity to go snowboarding as a day trip by train, and also to visit some more rural Japanese places – especially hot springs, which are great for keeping the chilly Japanese winter at bay.

Altogether I strongly recommend Japan to anyone as a place to live and work. The JSPS fellowship is a fantastic opportunity that I am very grateful to have had, and I would encourage anyone else thinking about applying to do so.

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