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Perhaps it's because I'm an archaeologist, but my expectations before leaving the UK were of a country steeped in rich shogun history, the noble culture of the samurai, geisha, and the tea ceremony. A little naïve probably, but I certainly wasn't disappointed. What I hadn't counted on, however, was the striking *contrasts* evident in modern Japan. There *is* a profound appreciation for history, but the everyday is driven by an extremely modern outlook, intensely urban centres give way to almost wilderness in the mountains, elegant sumi-e drawings meet luminous manga art. Such contrasts made my first weeks a bit of a rollercoaster. On the one hand I think the culture shock was positive, and I found this a very creative period. However, opening yourself up to experience the subtle differences between life in the UK and Japan in one go can be a bit overwhelming. I even found it had an effect on my memory recall, with so many cultural nuances to attend to it was difficult to sift more relevant information. For me, it was important to set up a good routine quickly, which helped me 'tune-out' these fascinating- yet distracting- stimuli and take them on board more gradually.

I was lucky that my research required travel around Japan's museums. I study the contribution that plants made to hunter-gatherer food culture. A particularly good medium for the preservation of delicate plant microfossils is in pottery 'foodcrusts'. Japan has some of the oldest pottery in the world, belonging to the Jōmon culture and extending back to c. 17,000 BP. My fellowship involved taking samples from a range of sites, whether caves, settlements, or shell middens to test how well microfossils like starches and phytoliths can be recovered. Travel in Japan can be challenging, and I recommend a website called Hyperdia which usefully condenses public transport timetables into a searchable format, in English.

It's not possible to study prehistoric food and fail to appreciate modern Japanese cuisine. To my delight modern dishes regularly incorporate wild foods, like ferns. My first supermarket trip involved suspiciously poking packaging, and wandering bemusedly down colourful aisles not really knowing what anything was. My host was an enthusiastic guide when it came to dining though. I was advised that if I truly wanted an insight into Japanese culture I should experience a tea ceremony, as it is a microcosm of values that have shaped Japan. I loved it so much I started taking lessons from a local Urasenke sensei, and managed to qualify on the first rung of a long ladder just before my fellowship ended. It's beautiful, and definitely worth experiencing if you have the chance.



Enjoying some 'oishi' sashimi and shabu shabu at a conference in Kyoto.



My host, Yasutami Nishida, walking up to visit the Jōmon rockshelter of Senpukuji, whilst on a sampling trip to Nagasaki.