

Almost as soon as I arrived at Narita last March, at the start of a two-week visit sponsored by the Japan Foundation, I was asked ‘Is this your first time in Tokyo?’ I had to admit that it was not.

The first time was in 1981 when, after a six-week train journey from London to Hong Kong, followed by a typhoon-buffed flight, my wife and I suffered the culture shock of moving from the then third-world China to the very First World Japan. That was not the only way in which we suffered, as we soon found out that the cost of a tourist day in Tokyo was roughly equivalent to two weeks in China, or a month in India.

Fortunately we had a friend living in Japan, and we rapidly made our way to his house in a little village called Kameoka outside Kyoto. Our host was an American who I had met when we were both studying at Oxford, and he spoke fluent Japanese. I soon found out that he was a devotee of all things Japanese and lived in the authentically Japanese way – of about two centuries ago. His house was an ancient shrine-keepers home with no concessions to modernity. At night we attached an Eighteenth century mosquito net to hooks on the ceiling, lay on futons with rice pillows and fell asleep to the sound of a waterfall, as a candle flickered in the garden’s stone lantern. The mosquito net was a beautiful antique, trimmed with red silk and adorned with brass fittings, but it was also full of holes that let the insects in. Still, we were young and in no mood to let practicality get in the way of aesthetics.

Our dear friend was, and is, Alex Kerr, who went on to write two best-selling books about Japan: *Lost Japan* and *Dogs and Demons*. Alex encouraged us to visit all of the main temples and

gardens in Kyoto, most of the lesser-known ones, and some of the downright obscure, but we really didn't venture beyond Kyoto and Tokyo on that 1981 visit.

So in 2010 I asked the Japan Foundation whether I might be able to travel a little more widely in Japan. I wanted to achieve two things during the precious two weeks that I had available. One was to meet Japanese academics and practitioners who are active in my own field of culture and the arts, and the other was to visit some of the ancient and modern sites of cultural interest that I was keen to see. So it was that I managed to experience an intense immersion in Japanese life – quite literally when my guide and I arrived at a mountainside Onsen in Yufuin.

Japan is a country of remarkable variety, from the ultra-modern sophistication of the Ginza to the timeless monasteries and landscapes of Mt Koya, but I discovered interesting threads of continuity, particularly in the way that ancient sensibilities are replicated using new and old materials in contemporary architecture. The old Japan that Alex Kerr taught me so much about kept on reappearing, in spite of all the development, concrete, and electrical cabling. It was apparent not only in architecture, design, fashion, ceramics and food, but less materially in the manners and sensibilities of the people that I met.

In the space of two weeks I managed not only to meet many new people and deliver a lecture on Cultural Diplomacy in Tokyo, but also to see the Ise Shrine, spend a night in a monastery in Koyasan, witness the amazing art project in Beppu and the

creative industry centre of Yokohama, and visit new museums in Fukuoka and Kyoto.

I have returned to the UK with a renewed appreciation of Japan, but also with an address book of Japanese contacts – some of whom I have already been quoting in my work, and others who I hope to keep in contact with, and possibly collaborate with. All of this is thanks to the Japan Foundation, who made this productive and enjoyable visit possible, for which I am very grateful.