

The True meaning of Culture Shock and the danger of eating too much いなりすし

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Before I left for Japan I remember people telling me to prepare myself for culture shock. In the JET handbook, numerous references are made to "culture shock" and the stress that many foreigners experience when they visit Japan for the first time. I had always considered culture shock to be something that only really affected individuals with little international experience when they are exposed to a diverse culture for the first time. I did not consider myself to be a likely victim of so called "culture shock", since I had traveled extensively throughout the world over the past ten years. My travels had taken me to many weird and wonderful countries, some of which are Third World. Furthermore, I studied languages and cultures of other countries at university and was required to spend an extended period living and studying abroad. To sum up, I considered myself to be an ideal candidate for life in Japan. However, I had overlooked one major factor; for the first time in my life I was going to be living in a country whose language I did not speak.

When I arrived in Tokyo and finally Ashikaga, I took everything in my stride. I spent the first few weeks being shown around and learning where everything was. The August heat was intense and the humidity unbelievable. At night my sleep would be disturbed by the chorus of insects outside my bedroom window. It was a delight to the 5 senses to be in Japan. Everything was new and exciting and I wanted to experience as much as possible.

As the weeks turned into months, people would often ask me how I was "coping" with life in Japan. I found the use of the word "coping" rather strange, as I had always associated it with unpleasant or difficult situations. My time in Japan had been neither difficult nor unpleasant, therefore I would always answer; "Life in Japan is great, thank you!" I did admit to occasionally feeling somewhat frustrated, especially in the beginning when I visited the supermarket to go grocery shopping. Quite often I would be unable to find exactly what I was looking for and due to the language barrier, I felt unable to seek assistance from the people who worked there. I should also mention at this point that I was a very strict vegetarian for several years before coming to Japan and this made life increasingly difficult for me in a country where they fail to see the difference between eating a prawn and a carrot. I remember going to restaurants during the months of September and October and my choice of food was always so limited. On several occasions I was served a dish that contained either meat or fish, even though I had been told by restaurant staff that it was definitely vegetarian. I don't think vegetarianism is properly understood in Japan. When I ask if a particular dish is vegetarian or not, maybe they think I mean, does it contain vegetables? Eating out soon became stressful and I began to avoid meals in restaurants altogether. It was in late November that I began to really reflect on my life so far in Japan and I took stock of the major changes that had taken place in my life, or

should I say the major changes in me brought about by my life in Japan. One of the most important changes was the fact that I had begun to eat meat again. I don't just mean the occasional piece of fish either, I mean a complete carnivore that feasts on almost anything that moves. The strangest thing was, I did not feel guilty, or even disappointed in myself. Fortunately I am one of the lucky ones who became vegetarian by choice, therefore it was not such a big problem for me to eat meat again. However, there are other types of vegetarians who have no choice and who are physically unable to consume meat, in the most extreme cases some people can become very ill from eating meat. I cannot begin to imagine how difficult life must be in Japan for vegetarians who cannot convert to meat. It was the right choice for me and I can now say that it has changed my whole perception of Japan. Beforehand I had lived on a diet of いなりすし. I ate いなりすし so much that sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. I was unable to move, only roll from side to side. I believed that I had in fact turned into one large, sweet and sticky いなりすし waiting to be eaten. I could hear Lindsay's voice in my head saying "I told you Ryan, you shouldn't have eaten so many!" Then I would wake up and realize it had all been a bad dream and I would smile, get up, walk over to the fridge, and have some いなりすし. Now that I am a fully fledged carnivore for the second time in my life, I can relax a little and grocery shopping is no longer "risky". I can go to restaurants and order food without turning it into a biology class dissection and interrogating the waiters as if they had some secret plan to hide dead animal in my meal and lie and tell me it was really a Lynda McCartney sushi roll. The number of people staring at me when I go to the supermarket is decreasing as the weeks go by, or maybe it's because I don't notice them staring so much anymore. Sometimes I even forget that I have blond hair and blue eyes then I startle myself and scream when I look in the mirror. I am not embarrassed to admit that I have experienced a certain degree of culture shock since coming to Japan and I am pleased to say that it has had a positive effect on me, so much so that I have agreed to stay a second year in Ashikaga. In 3 weeks time I will visit home (Scotland), for the first time in seven months. I am now being told to prepare myself for the culture shock of going home..... Oh no, not again!