



The Karakoram Highway, China



Meet the Specialist

Ben Colbridge

The Other Side of the World

Ben Colbridge describes four years in the Far East

The Far East had always been the definition of ‘the other side of the world’ for me. As far from ‘here’ as you could get. And so when, during a frustratingly unproductive eight months in the lab on the third year of my Molecular Biology degree, my mind began to wander from the *E.coli* that I willed in vain to reproduce, to places less familiar, the Far East seemed the logical answer.

Japan had always been a country almost mythical to me; a foreign land where trains travelled as fast as planes, where volcanoes loomed over skyscrapered horizons, an unintelligible hieroglyphic language and of a race of exotic people quietly industrious on their island nation. And so it was, that two weeks after graduating, I found myself on a plane to Tokyo, my uncooperative *E.coli* still festering in a lab somewhere far behind.

I spent the following four years living and teaching English in a small rice-farming village in the rural south of Japan, on the slopes of one of the world’s most active volcanoes, Mount Aso (never was there a bathroom with a better view!). With a population of only 2,500 people, I found myself entirely immersed into village culture within a few hours of arriving. I taught myself Japanese over the next couple of years, learning most from old men whilst lounging in the soothing hot springs around the volcano.

I travelled from the snowy north island of Hokkaido to the sub-tropical island chain of Okinawa to the south as well as some of Asia’s other gems, from Thailand to South Korea and Indonesia to Micronesia, each time returning to my home in the Japanese rice paddies.

One of the places I visited that really caught my attention was Japan’s vast neighbour China, incredibly different to Japan, but intricately similar in so many ways. My first trip was a long weekend, during which time I explored Beijing and the Great Wall. I knew this country was a place that I wanted to return to, which I am lucky to have done on a number of occasions, including a trip along the dusty but beautiful Silk Route into Central Asia.

I fell deeply in love with the Far East, and found myself preferring many aspects of the Japanese way of life to those which I had left behind in England. I became more and more ‘Japanese’ to the people around me and satisfyingly more and more ‘foreign’ to my family. Of particular note, the incredible politeness of the Japanese people and the beautiful mountain landscapes make this the most civilized and captivating of countries. I married into the Japanese culture just before leaving, ensuring that my love for and connection with the country and the Far East will last a lifetime.