

'I never thought I'd be doing *that*.'

If I could sum up my time on Daiwa in a phrase, that'd be it. From spending evenings practicing conversation with strangers in ramen bars (fun), to shifting to an entirely online language education (not fun), to spending a day attaching stickers to apple trees (downright bizarre), it has been a year of peaks and troughs – if you'll forgive the on-the-nose phrase. And while 2020 was hardly the year anyone wanted, I feel extremely lucky that I was leading most of my socially-distanced existence in the safety and comfort of my 1-bedroom in Tokyo. Life is certainly not 'normal', but Japan has not been hit as hard by the pandemic as most of the western world.

At the time of writing, I'm coming to the end of my internship at the Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Medical Science, where I am working as a research assistant on a teenage mental health cohort study. The team is small but close-knit, and it's been a big challenge – but a lot of fun – to get used to a Japanese working environment. My language ability is coming along too. There are still plenty of occasions I'm not able to follow the discussion during a meeting or where I come out with an awkward answer to a basic question, but it's far more than I thought I'd be able to do in just 18 months. And, quite apart from the stereotypes, my workplace is fairly casual – and overtime is at a minimum!

Before starting work, I did my homestay in rural Akita prefecture – famous for its rice, its dogs, and for being far-out in the *inaka* (middle-of-nowhere countryside). But contrary to the laid-back lifestyle in the sleepy countryside I had pictured, every day I was meeting new people and taking part in new local-speciality activities. Everything from making homemade gyoza...



...to learning about the *Namahage*, local-legend ogres who terrorize Akita children at the beginning of each year to ensure they study hard at school...



...to spending a day in the glorious Akita sunshine applying stickers to apples still growing on the tree, to make *kotobuki ringo* ('congratulation apples').



Here's the finished product, sent to me a month later. I sense a great business opportunity for any of the orchard-owners back home in Kent...



And as serendipitous practice for the Daiwa graduation ceremony, I was asked to give a speech in front of a 'small' send-off party of approximately 40 local residents:



So – from the sublime to the ridiculous, I've found myself saying 'I never thought I'd be doing that' *continuously* this past 18 months, and I couldn't be happier for it. I'm extremely grateful to the Daiwa programme for enabling me to experience all this. And, as I'm planning to continue working in Japan after our graduation... long may it continue!