



Rachel King at the British embassy

British Civil Servant Thriving in Tokyo

By Rachel King

A lot of people in the UK are somewhat ignorant about life in Japan, and before I moved here I had a stereotypical view of what Tokyo would be like: big, busy, and crowded, with more neon lights than green spaces. So I was delighted to discover an extremely “livable” city: safe, efficient, with creative use of space and countless hidden fun places.

I work as a civil servant for the UK government, as the Director of Overseas Operations for the Department for International Trade. Normally, my office would be located in London, but the government made a special exception, and it is located in the British embassy in Tokyo. Our department has staff in over a hundred countries around the world, and I have to ensure that we have the right people in the right places, with all the support they need to help British companies to export their goods and services and to encourage foreign companies to invest in the UK. Although my job is global, rather than focused solely on Japan, it has been very useful for me to talk to senior representatives of Japanese companies to find out what they want from the UK.

I have been very lucky throughout my career to have strong female role models, and I have never felt held back because I am a woman. I have met many talented, determined young women in the government and business communities in Tokyo, and I hope I have shown at least some of them—and their male colleagues!—what is possible.

One aspect of Tokyo that has really surprised me is the air quality: it makes running and cycling in the city a pleasure. I am lucky to live very close to the jogging track that circles the Imperial Palace, and I try to go for a run a few mornings a week before work. I encounter a beautiful scene when I turn a corner and see the Marunouchi skyline, especially in the morning sunshine—it reminds me how lucky I am to be living here.

“I have been very lucky throughout my career to have strong female role models.”

Home for me in the UK is an old house in a small village—very different from my modern apartment in Tokyo. Although finding tranquil spots can take a little effort, plenty are available if you know where to look. I love sitting on my balcony overlooking the Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery (which is actually more of a memorial garden) and visiting the turtles in the nearby Koishikawa Korakuen Gardens, a traditional Japanese garden that dates back to the Edo Period (1603-1867). The British embassy also has a lovely garden that combines some very English features—a big lawn with rose-covered trellises—with some that are typically Japanese—one of the best displays of cherry blossoms in Tokyo.

My favorite spot, though, is the Nezu Museum in Omotesando, which shows changing exhibitions of Japanese and Asian art in a stunning contemporary building located in an enchanting garden. The garden is in the middle of a very busy shopping district, and it always feels like a small miracle to step off the street into this oasis of winding paths, stone lanterns, and statues of the Buddha. It exemplifies the attention to detail and commitment to contemplation at the heart of what I love most about Japan.

Rachel King is Director of Overseas Operations for the UK's Department for International Trade. She has previously worked at the UK Treasury and Prime Minister's Office. Rachel and her husband moved to Tokyo in July 2015.