

# Japanese Culture Survival Guide



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### Visiting Someone's Home

It is a custom in Japan to bring a gift when visiting someone's home. The standard gift that Japanese bring each other is food related. The purpose of the gift is to show appreciation of the invitation to the home and also to apologize for the disruption you will cause by being there. The gift is usually not expensive. If you are visiting a Japanese home from another country, the perfect gift is something native to your own country. Liquor is a very popular choice. Don't overdue it. Keep the gift simple or it might be difficult for the host to receive the gift. Although not necessary, a gift is definitely recommended.

### Entering the Home

In Japanese homes it is a custom to remove your shoes just after coming through the entrance. The area just inside the entrance of a Japanese home is called a GENKAN **げんかん**. The GENKAN is always one-step lower than the main part of the house. After stepping up into the main part of the house it is a custom to turn your shoes so that they face the outside.

After removing your shoes at the GENKAN it is a custom to put on slippers, which are usually in front of the GENKAN or in the immediate area. The slippers are supposed to be "one size fits all" but are almost always too small. Remember that Japanese tend to have small feet.

The slippers can be worn until you leave. However, they are to be removed before entering any room with TATAMI **たたみ** mats. Do not walk on the TATAMI with your slippers on. The proper footwear for TATAMI is socks or bare feet.

You must also remove your slippers when entering the bathroom. DON'T WORRY, you will not have to go barefoot into the bathroom! There will be another set of slippers that are only used in the bathroom. Upon leaving the bathroom don't forget to change slippers again, as it is pretty embarrassing to walk in the other parts of the house with the bathroom slippers.



(c) 1998 TTI  
home entrance (genkan)



straw mat (tatami)

### Leaving the Home

Upon leaving the home you will remove the slippers and step directly into your shoes which should be facing towards the door. Then turn the slippers towards the inside of the house for the next visitor.



### Taking a Bath

Japanese baths are totally different than American baths. Japanese take a bath every night before they sleep. The shower and bathtub of the majority of Japanese bathrooms are in the same room but are separated with the shower on the outside of the bathtub.



Before entering the bathtub, washing the body is the rule. Shampooing of the hair can be after or before entering the tub. Why is washing before entering the tub important you might ask? It is because each member of the family uses the same water. The water is changed only once each day. The purpose of the bath is to relax and warm the body, NOT to wash. It is not proper to bring the face cloth or any other towel into the bathtub. Since everyone uses the same water, keeping the water clean is expected.

In traditional Japanese homes there is a decided order for bath taking. Usually the Father takes his bath first, if he comes home late then this order will obviously be different. In most homes the last person to enter take a bath is responsible for draining the water and wiping down the tub. However, in some homes the tub water is used the next day for laundry. A hose is used to siphon the water into the washing machine. This is not so strange since the water is clean. If you have the opportunity to be a guest in a Japanese home, at some point you will be politely asked to take a bath. Don't refuse the offer. You may want to be kind and let someone else go first, but this innocent gesture of kindness might create an awkward situation.

### Sleeping in a Futon

You will love sleeping in a real Japanese futon. Although hotels in Japan have beds, The Japanese almost always sleep in a futon. The futon is made up of three main parts.

#### Shikibuton しきぶとん

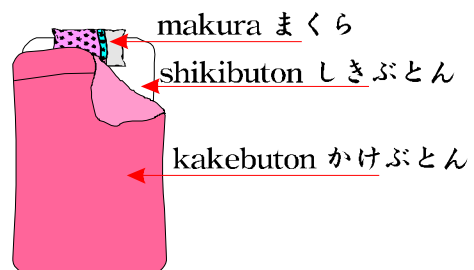
This is the portion that you sleep on. It is usually fairly heavy.

#### Takebuton かけぶとん

This is the blanket that you cover yourself. It is not that heavy, but it is very warm.

#### Makura まくら

This is the pillow. The stuffing for the pillow is a type of bean. But it is very comfortable to sleep on, as it adjusts to the shape of your head.

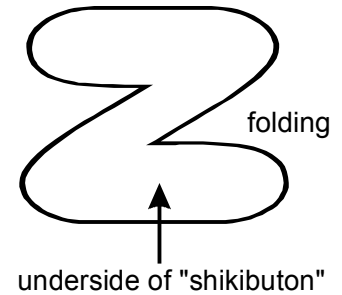


While in Japan you may see futons hanging out of windows or off of balconies. The reason for this is to dry out the futon dry, as Japan is so damp.

## Folding a Futon

In the morning the futon is folded and put in a closet. It is a custom that the guest who slept in the futon folds it. It is much like making the bed when you stay at someone's house. Each part is folded differently. The "shikibuton" is folding like the letter "Z". When the "shikibuton" make sure that the underside is the only portion that comes in contact with the floor.

The "kakebuton" is folded into four and then placed on top of the "shikibuton". Then the "makura" is placed on top of the "kakebuton". Then the entire set is placed in a corner of the room or a closet. If you are a guest in the house the corner will be fine.





## Chopstick Taboos

Learning to use chopsticks is not that difficult and the more they are used the more natural they feel. Regardless of how skillful you are at eating with chopsticks, you should pay attention to the basic courtesies and customs that are associated with using chopsticks. Let's look at the things you should never do with chopsticks.

1. Never use chopsticks to point to someone.
2. Don't bite the chopsticks.
3. Don't lick the chopsticks.
4. Don't stab food with the chopsticks. Although this is the easy way to pick up a piece of food, the proper way would be to hold the food between the two chopsticks.
5. Don't stand the chopsticks up in soup or any bowl. They should be either placed on the side of the bowl closest to you (Figure 1) or in front of the bowl on a chopstick "holder". (Figure 2)

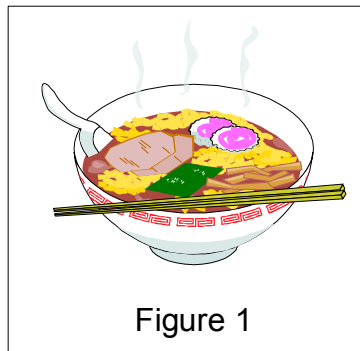


Figure 1

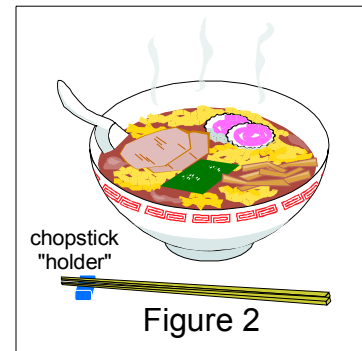


Figure 2

6. When taking food from a bowl not your own, or from the middle of the table, never use the end of the chopsticks that enters the mouth. Instead, turn the chopsticks around and pick up the food with the opposite end.

## Tipping in a Restaurant

It is not a custom to tip the server in a restaurant. However don't be surprised to see a service fee added to your check when you pay. This fee unfortunately doesn't go to the server but to the restaurant.



## Bill Denominations

Japanese paper money comes in 1, 5 and 10 thousand yen bills. There is also a 5 hundred yen bill, but is no longer being produced and has been replaced with a 500 yen coin.



*Thousand yen bill*



*5 Thousand yen bill*



*10 Thousand yen bill  
(the largest in circulation)*

## Unique Features

Each bill is sized differently. The thousand yen being the shortest, the 5 thousand yen bill is approximately 1 cm longer and the 10 thousand yen bill is 1 cm longer than the 5 thousand.

Each bill also has Braille writing in the corner for the seeing impaired. Each bill has watermarks in order to prevent counterfeiting.

## Japanese Coins

There are six coins in circulation. The 500, 100, 50, 10, 5 and 1 yen coin. The one yen coin is made out of aluminium and if you didn't know you might think that it was part of a play money set.



*500 yen*



*100 yen*



*50 yen*



*10 yen*



*5 yen*



*1 yen*



## **Good Luck**

The 5-yen coin in Japanese is pronounced "go-en". This also coincidentally means "good luck". For this reason the 5 yen coin is thought to be good luck.

## **The Newest Bill**

Japan recently released the 2000-yen bill to commemorate the year 2000. This was the first new bill since 1958 when the 10,000-yen bill was released. This is the first bill with the number 2 in the amount as up until its release only 1 and 5 were on the bills. The announcement came as a surprise since many expected a 100,000-yen bill.

The new bill has on its front an illustration of Shureimon Gate in Naha, a symbol of Japan's southernmost Prefecture Okinawa.

The other side of the bill features the meeting of the two male aristocrats, Genji and his son, an illustration from Japan's national treasure, Tale of Genji Scrolls, which portray scenes from the 11th-century romantic novel Tale of Genji with prose passages.

Murasaki Shikibu, author of the Tale of Genji, is the second woman to be featured in Japan's currency notes since the 1881-1883 period when Empress Jingu's likeness was found on 1-yen, 5-yen and 10-yen bills issued then.

The size of the 2000-yen bill is slightly larger than the 1000-yen bill and smaller than the 5000 yen bill.



## Men and Woman Bathing



Hot springs are a big part of Japanese culture. It would be shocking to hear that there was a Japanese person that had never visited one.

The springs are split up into a men's area and a women's area. In the past the men's area was considerably larger than the women's area. However, in recent times many hot spring resorts have a larger women area. This is because the average person taking a trip or vacation these days tends to be female. Some hot spring resorts rotate the sex of the areas every day. Also, some hot springs have coed baths, but they are not as common as in the past.

## Natural and "unnatural" Hot Springs



Not all hot springs are natural, meaning that the source of the spring comes from the earth. Many of the natural hot springs come from a nearby volcano and the water has a strong sulfur smell to it. A natural hot spring is called an **onsen**.

Hot springs that are not from a natural source, but are heated artificially are called **sentou**. A **sentou** can be just as relaxing as an **onsen** with the exception that the smell of sulfur is not present.

If you have the chance, I would highly recommend that you visit a Japanese hot springs, it is quite worth it.

## You WASH my back, I'll WASH yours!?

While washing prior to entering the springs it would not be strange if someone offered to wash your back. This normally doesn't happen out of the blue, but the person you have struck up a conversation with just might offer. While in America the offer might be taken the wrong way, in Japan it is just a common courtesy. If someone offers to wash your back and you accept this offer, don't be afraid to return the favor.

## But... I DON'T WANT TO BE NAKED!

Japanese people of all ages are fully naked when they bathe. Even in the coed baths. This is the custom. It doesn't mean that it would be polite to stare and point. It would be very out of place to attempt to wear a bathing suit into the hot spring. For those of you who just can't bear to bare yourself, there is an accepted way of concealing your nakedness. The towel that is used to wash before entering can be held in front of your "special area" on your way to the bath, but SHOULD NOT to be taken into the bath. The towel is not big enough to wrap yourself up, but it does the job. Men normally hang the towel from just above the special area one hand and women normally conceal their breasts and special area with the towel.





### Which way is front?



Forget the language barrier! Your biggest challenge while in Japan will probably be the Japanese style toilet. Due to cost effectiveness of this style of toilet, they are common in department stores and many restaurants. Many foreigners are baffled as to which way to face when squatting to do what they came to do. You should face the raised portion of the toilet when you... go. Do NOT sit on the porcelain. These toilets are for squatting and it would not be very comfortable to sit.

### One Point Advice (a MUST read)

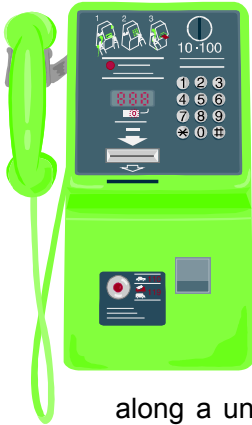
Going in a Japanese style toilet can be VERY tricky. Big mistakes are possible. I recommend that you actually take off your pants and underwear BEFORE you squat. There will always be a hook or someplace to put your pants and the door and wall of the stalls go are very close to the ground unlike American toilets there is little chance that someone will stick their head in and peek under! It is a tough balancing act with trying not to touch your socks on the toilet floor but if you don't take off your pants you MAY be in for a big surprise when you stand up thinking that you have successfully hit your target (I speak from experience). Getting shoes that are easy to take on and off is a really good idea.

### The Secret Toilet

For those of you who, no matter how many times you try, cannot use the Japanese style toilet, there is a secret that you should remember when in Japan. All of the handicapped bathrooms are American style toilets. Most major department stores have them. They are generally not on every floor so you must ask where they are. Don't worry, there is not a penalty or law that prohibits using the handicapped toilet. And many Japanese, I am sure, will understand.



## Using Pay Phones



The majority of pay phones in Japan take coins and “Telephone Cards”. Telephone cards can be purchased in almost all convenience store, train station shops and many times the cards are also sold in a vending machine inside or near the telephone. The cards are sold ¥500 and ¥1000 units. To use the card, insert it into the card slot and simply place your call. A ¥500 card has 50 units. One unit is worth ¥10 of talk time. The ¥1000 card has 105 units. You get 5 bonus points with the ¥1000 card. The amount of current remaining units on the card is displayed on the phone. If your phone card has become empty during a phone call the phone will beep to let you know and then you have the option of inserting another phone card or coins. At the end of your phone call the phone card will always be returned, even if it is empty. The phone will also stamp a hole

along a unit chart on top of the phone card to let you know approximately how many units are left. The hole will be stamped close to the number that best represents the remaining units.



*Telephone cards in units of 50 or 105 can be bought in many stores.*



*Many people collect telephone cards, much like postal stamps are collected.*

## Telephone Cards – Beware!

Never buy a telephone card from someone off of the street! No matter what they say! If you are caught using on of these cards you could be arrested. The phone cards purchased off of the street are sold at a super low price and may seem irresistible, but they are illegal to use, so don't!

There used to be phone cards with larger value, such as ¥3000 and ¥5000 cards however, unscrupulous individuals found a way to “recharge” the card by pasting a new magnetic strip on the back of the card and had obviously figured out a way to trick the phones. Because of this problem the larger denomination cards were discontinued.

The rumor is that new phones notify police nearby when an illegal phone card is used, and some might actually lock the criminal in the phone booth... I don't now if I believe that one.

### Telephone Card Use Only Phones

Some phones, such as phones on the bullet train, only take telephone cards. If this is the case there is almost always a card vending machine nearby, usually next to the phone.

### International Calls

Only designated Pay Phones will allow calls to other countries. This will be indicated by a mark on the phone and calling instructions. To place a call you can use coins or a telephone card. Credit cards are not accepted.

The two major international calling companies are ITJ, IDJ and KDD. To place a call, pick up the receiver and insert payment. You will NOT here a dial tone until a coin or phone card has been inserted. Then dial the access number for ITJ **0041** IDJ **0061** or KDD **001** and then dial the country code. The country code for America is 1. Then dial the area code and local number. KDD is probably the most expensive.

If you have an MCI, ATT, SPRINT card etc. you will need to contact the company that issued the card for instructions on usage while in Japan.

## Useful related words

Japanese	English	Kana	Kanji
genkan	The area just inside the main entrance of Japanese homes.	げんかん	玄関
tatami	A tightly woven straw mat used in traditional Japanese style rooms.	たたみ	畳
tereka	a telephone card	テレカ	—
kokusai denwa	international phone	こくさいでんわ	国際電話
koushuu denwa	public telephone	こうしゅうでんわ	公衆電話
en	yen	えん	円
satsu	a bill (currency)	さつ	札
kozeni	coins	こぜに	小銭
okane	money	おかね	お金
ofuro	a bath	おふる	お風呂
sentakki	laundry machine	せんたっき	洗濯機
mizu	water	みず	水
onsen	natural hot springs	おんせん	温泉
sentou	hot bath (not natural)	せんとう	銭湯
oyu	hot water	おゆ	お湯
onnayu	female bath	おんなゆ	女湯
otokoyu	male bath	おとこゆ	男湯
konyoku	coed bath	こんよく	混浴
toire	toilet	トイレ	—
otearai	bathroom	おてあらい	お手洗い
washiki toire	Japanese style toilet	わしきトイレ	和式トイレ
youshiki toire	Western style toilet	ようしきトイレ	様式トイレ
ohashi	chopsticks	おはし	お箸
hashi oki	chopstick holder	はしおき	箸置き