

JAPANESE MANNERS AND ETIQUETTE

Here's a word about good manners while living in Japan. Up to now, unless you've been living in a cave, you must have heard about taking off your shoes before entering a residence and not getting into a bath while still soapy, since others have already talked these issues to death. But there are a lot more items you may not know. Japanese are very conscious about hygiene (except for the park and train station toilets, which are LETHAL), and Japanese are a very sensitive people -- more fastidious about etiquette and proper form. Many Japanese already have a negative image of westerners after observing how some have acted in Japan--hence the reputation of some landlords and real-estate agents not to rent their apartments. Whether you help dispel their preconceptions, or just reinforce them by acting like you belong in a zoo is entirely up to you.

Whether you are in Japan for tourism, travel, or living in Japan, your actions have a profound impact on how others perceive you, particularly important if you're looking for work. Here are a few do's and don'ts you should know.

Eating--

- It is impolite to eat or drink something while walking down the street.
- Do not bite or clean your fingernails, gnaw on pencils, or lick your fingers in front of others.
- In restaurants or when visiting it's customary to get a small, moist rolled-up towel (cold in summer, hot in winter) called an "*oshibori*" to wipe their hands with. It's impolite to wipe the face and neck with it though some do in less formal places.
- In Japan it is impolite to pour your own drink when eating with others--you pour your companion's drink and your companion pours yours.
- If you don't want any more to drink, leave your glass full.
- It's customary to say "*Itadakimasu*" before eating and "*Gochisosama deshita*" after eating, especially if you're being treated, as well as "*Kanpai*" for "Cheers".
- When sharing a dish, put what you take on your own plate before eating it.
- Do not make excessive special requests in the preparation of your food, nor wolf it down.
- Do not use your chopsticks to skewer food, move dishes around.
- NEVER dish out food to another using the same ends you just ate from--use the top ends.
- Don't use your chopsticks to point at somebody.
- Don't leave your chopsticks standing up out of your food.
- It is normal in Japan to pick up your rice or *miso* soup bowl and hold it under your chin to keep stuff from falling.
- Traditional Japanese food is served on several small plates, and it's normal to alternate between dishes instead of fully eating one dish after another.
- Don't leave a mess on your plate--fold your napkins neatly.
- Don't take wads of napkins, sugar packs, or steal "souvenirs" when you leave a restaurant.
- Do not put soy sauce on your rice--it isn't meant for that.
- Do not put sugar or cream in Japanese tea.
- There is no real custom like "help yourself". Wait until the host offers something.

- If you act as host, you should anticipate your guest's needs (cream/sugar, napkins, etc.).
- If you must use a toothpick, at least cover your mouth with your other hand.
- Be aware that in Japan it is normal to make slurping sounds when you're eating noodles.
- In Japan, it's good (in commercials, anyway) to make loud gulping noises when drinking. Expect to hear lots of it in ads.
- It is normal to pay a restaurant or bar bill at the register instead of giving money to the waiter/waitress. There is no tipping in Japan.
- It's considered rude to count your change after paying the bill in a store or restaurant, but the Japanese themselves do give it a cursory lookover.

Everyday Living--

- Thou shalt NOT BE LATE for appointments.
- There is no custom of "Ladies First".
- Avoid excessive physical and eye contact--forget the back-slapping, prodding, and pointing directly at someone with your finger (use your hand to point, if you must).
- Japanese often use silence for communication as much as speaking.
- Do not chew gum when working or in other formal situations.
- When Japanese start work at 9 AM, they START WORK at 9 AM.
- Avoid lots of jewelry or very colorful clothes when going to work.
- White-collar Japanese typically leave the office only after their superiors have done so. Do not expect someone to be instantly free once the official business hours are over.
- Exchanging business cards is *de rigueur* in formal introductions. You should extend your card to the other person with both hands, right side up to them (upside down to you). You receive cards with both hands also. Be sure to look at the card and not just pocket it. Never put it in your pants pocket and sit on it in front of them.
- It is polite to put "-*san*" after another person's name, or "-*chan*" after a young girl's name, or "-*kun*" after a boy's name, but NEVER use these after your own.
- Do not scream about why nobody speaks English, why there aren't five different varieties of a product you want, or why workplaces or restaurants are filled with chain-smokers. The "health thing" is not big here yet.
- Avoid shouting loudly at someone to get their attention--wave, or go up to them.
- If you have to blow your nose, leave the room, or at the very least try to face away from other people--and use a tissue--not a handkerchief!
- Don't wear tattered clothes outside, nor socks with holes when visiting someone.
- On escalators, stay on the left side if you plan to just stand and not climb them.
- Japan has no tradition of making sarcastic remarks to make a point, nor "Bronx cheers" or "the Finger" -- avoid using them.
- The Japanese gesture of "Who, me?" is pointing at their nose, not their chest.
- The Japanese gesture for "Come here" is to put your hand palm out, fingers up, and raise and lower your fingers a few times. The western gesture of palm-up, closing your hand is only used to call animals to you.
- The Japanese gesture for no is fanning your hand sideways a few times in front of your face.

- Japanese residences have thin walls and poor insulation - don't blast your stereo or television.
- Don't wear your slippers into a *tatami* (straw) mat room.
- It's customary to sit on the floor in a *tatami* room (called "*washitsu*").
- Don't wear your slippers into the *genkan* (at the entrance to a home, where the shoes are kept), nor outside.
- Don't wear the toilet room slippers outside the toilet room.
- Japanese wear kimono or *yukata* (light summer kimono) with the left side over the right. The reverse is only for the dead at funerals.
- It's better to wear shoes slipped on easily when visiting someone.
- It's polite to initially refuse someone's offer of help. Japanese may also initially refuse your offer even if they really want it. Traditionally an offer is made 3 times. It may be better to state you'll carry their bag, call a taxi, etc., instead of pushing them to be polite and refuse.
- When they laugh Japanese women often cover their mouths with their hand. This comes from an old Buddhist notion that showing bone is unclean, as well as a horrendous lack of orthodontics in Japan. If you're a woman you have no obligation to copy this, but you will soon notice how frequently Japanese do this.
- It's polite to bring some food (gift-wrapped in more formal situations) or drinks when you visit someone.
- Gift giving is very important in Japan, but extravagant gifts require an equally or slightly higher extravagant gift in return. Avoid giving pricey gifts.
- Giving cash is normal for ceremonies like weddings and funerals; but given in special envelopes with a printed or real red tie around it (available in stationary and convenience stores). Use new and not old bills.
- After coming back from a vacation it is normal to bring a small gift for all those you work with, even if you don't really like them a lot. Nothing expensive is required, however.
- It's polite to belittle the value of your gift or food when you offer it, even if it's blatantly untrue.
- In more formal circumstances it's impolite to unwrap a gift someone brings you as soon as you receive it. In casual surroundings it's normal to ask the giver if it can be opened now.
- It's polite to see a guest to the door (or the front of a building even) when they leave.
- When someone visits it's polite to turn their shoes around and put them together so they can put them on easily.
- This is older custom, but in a home the guest is seated facing the room entrance. The highest ranking host sits across from the guest.
- Again old, but in a car the highest ranking person sits behind the driver. The lowest rides shotgun.
- For taxis the driver will open/close the rear left hand door for you.
- Japanese often compliment each other to promote good will, but it is polite to deny how well you speak Japanese, how nice you look, etc.
- In Japan the whole family uses the same bath water -- as a guest you will probably be given the privilege of using the bath water first. Do NOT drain the water out after you have finished your bath!