

Traveling in Japan (2/20/18 version)

Bathing, Sinks, Toilets

A Japanese bath includes showering and then soaking in a deep, hot tub. If you prefer, you can simply shower. When your host tells you it's time to take a bath, go ahead and do it. It may not be the time of day you would prefer to bathe, but your host family is showing you honor by asking you to take your bath at that time. Be sure to leave your shoes outside the door of the bathing area so others know you are in there. Leave the water in the tub for the next bather to use. Remember you are already clean from your shower when you get in the tub.

The sink where you brush your teeth may be in a hallway and not with the bathing area.

The toilet may be in a separate, small room. Traditional Japanese toilets are level with the floor. Most toilets in Japan now are Western style (like ours). Now many public buildings and homes have high-tech toilets with controls and the capability of washing, drying, and powdering.

Beverages

Tea, an extremely important element of Japanese culture, comes in several varieties—green, barley, and wheat among others—and may be served at any time of day. Tea is included with most every meal and social occasion and does contain caffeine. A Japanese woman would be remiss if she didn't serve tea to a visitor who dropped by her home for even the most insignificant reason. Tea as a beverage is served in small cups without handles and no saucers. Tea sets always include five cups. Nothing comes in sets of four in Japan. Coffee, fruit juice, bottled water, and a huge variety of soft drinks are available. Milk may be available on request. Iced tea is mostly only available in expensive restaurants and it is never sweet!

The tea ceremony, which began many centuries ago with samurai, is considered an art form. Classes are offered where participants learn to be the tea master at a tea ceremony. During the tea ceremony, strong, foamy, dark green tea is served in decorative bowls in a very quiet, serene atmosphere. When participating in a tea ceremony the first time, follow the instructions of the tea master. Always try to drink all of the tea in three slurps.

Bowing is the most courteous greeting. Women bow with their hands together in front of them. Men bow with their hands to their sides. It is courteous to bow low when meeting someone important or elderly.

Business cards, essential to almost every adult, are taken very seriously and often contain a photo and detailed information about the person. Presentation is very important. When presenting your card, hold the card at the top where the recipient can see the card well and bow. The recipient of a business card should take time to read it carefully and then present his card in the same manner. Never accept a card without looking at it and just carelessly stick it in your pocket. Students may want to have a card as well.

Chopsticks will be present at all meals. Forks are readily available. Never leave your chopsticks inserted in rice standing up. It's a good idea to practice using chopsticks before the trip.

Commuting two to three hours each way by train to work every day is not uncommon. Usually any public transportation is extremely crowded. The rule is every person for himself. Japanese men do not give up their seats for women who are left standing—even elderly women. But visitors to Japan

can be a good example and give up their seat to elderly people or women. Americans should not be loud when traveling on trains and subways.

The crime rate is very low in Japan, but has increased some in recent years with the economic downturn. Travelers need to use common sense to avoid pickpockets.

Electric Current

The electrical current is 100 volts, 50 or 60 cycles AC depending on the location in Japan. The United States runs on 110-volt, 60-cycle AC current. Wall outlets in Japan accept two flat prongs as in the U.S., but do not accept three-prong plugs.

English is the second language of Japan. Most people, other than the very elderly and very young children, have studied and speak some English. Sometimes Japanese people understand and read and write English better than they can speak it. Expect your hosts to want to practice speaking English with you. Be careful and thoughtful about what you teach them.

Food and Meals

To prepare for the trip, eat at Japanese restaurants and try a variety of foods before departure. In Japan some food will be familiar and some may be unusual to you. It is polite to sample the foods served to you but don't force yourself to eat things you really don't like. Slurping soup is considered good manners. Eating and drinking while walking down the street are considered very bad manners. Take along some of your favorite packaged snacks. Your host family may eat their meals around a low table while sitting on cushions on the floor or they may have a table and chairs. American fast food is quite popular in Japan now. Napkins are not as available as in the US. Your host family will provide most of your meals while there. If they take you to a restaurant, offer to pay for your meal. If your hosts insist on paying, let them.

Gestures change from one culture to another. In Japan never point with one finger to acknowledge a person. Use the entire hand in a sweeping motion. When a Japanese person touches the tip of their nose with the tip of their index finger, they are gesturing "me" or "I." Americans point to their chest to indicate "me" or "I."

Gift giving is very important. Delegation members will receive a profile sheet with information on their host family that may help with gift selection. Take small, lightweight gifts to give your host family and other people who help you or in return for gifts you receive. Gifts that are handmade or native to Tennessee are best. Be sure the gifts you select are not imported unless they have special meaning! Consider taking gift bags in your suitcase to wrap the gifts when you arrive. Your hosts will probably give you gifts. You are responsible for getting everything belonging to you back home in your own suitcase. Do not attempt to bring home any items not allowed such as food not commercially packaged and sealed. Do not overly compliment items you see or your hosts may feel obligated to give them to you.

Ground Transportation

Vehicles are driven on the left side of the road. Be sure to keep this information in mind when crossing the street. To be courteous to drivers approaching from the opposite direction, drivers often turn off their headlights when stopped at intersections. The buses in Japan have lower ceilings. If you are tall, watch out! Subways are the most economical and efficient form of travel in Tokyo. Pay close attention to the leader of your group when riding the subway. Hold onto your subway ticket as you will need it when you exit the subway station. Do not eat or drink on the subway.

The Japanese language is very precisely spoken. The vowels are always pronounced the same. Kimono is pronounced kee-moh-noh not kah-moh-nah. When attempting to speak any Japanese word, do not place emphasis on one syllable but treat all syllables equally.

The sounds of Japanese when written phonetically are

a – ah
e – eh
i – ee
o – oh
u – oo

Laundry

Tell your host mother when you need to do laundry and she will most likely be glad to help you. Do not give the impression you need the items immediately or she may drop everything to get it done for you. Offer to help. Most homes do not have clothes dryers and clothes are hung up to dry.

Loudness

Americans have the reputation of being loud and rude when visiting other countries. It is your job to prove them wrong and be reserved and quiet in public places.

Money

Japanese currency is called *yen*. You can exchange your money for a fee before departure through your family's bank. If you need to exchange additional money, your leader will help you identify the best place. Try to only exchange what you will need. You will lose money if you have to exchange it back to American dollars. You can only exchange bills you have left and not coins. Keep some American cash for use while traveling to and from Japan. Visa and MasterCard are accepted in many stores and restaurants but not all of them. If you want to use a credit or debit card, contact your card's administrator before the trip to let them know you want to use the card while in Japan. You will need cash for any expenses in Tsuru.

No (*ie* in Japanese) is avoided as much as possible in order to be polite. When a Japanese person responds with "It is difficult," he may really mean, "No. It is not possible."

Religion

Buddhism and Shinto are the primary religions in Japan. Less than one percent of the population is Christian. Many people do practice any religion.

Rice, usually the short-grained white variety, is served plain, sticky, and separately in a small bowl for each person at most meals including breakfast. It is considered slightly rude to put sauce on your rice. Never stick your chopsticks vertically in your rice.

Shoes are always removed before entering a Japanese home and sometimes when entering public buildings. Slippers provided in the building may be worn on the hardwood and tile floors. Never wear any type of shoes when walking on tatami floors (woven grass mats). Wear the shoes provided when in the toilet room at home. When you leave your host home, your shoes will be waiting for you just outside the door. Tsuru-Kojokan High School leaders will provide slippers for you to wear while at school. They will probably not fit you. So take a pair of newer, comfortable shoes to leave and wear at school.

Sleeping

You will most likely sleep on a futon on the tatami (woven grass mats) floor at your host family's home. In the morning you may be asked to fold up your bedding and futon and place them in a storage area. Some homes have beds.

Smoking

While smoking has decreased in the last few years, many Japanese still smoke.

Time Difference

Japan is 14 hours ahead of Central Daylight Saving Time and 15 hours ahead of Central Standard Time.

Tipping is not necessary in Japan and is considered an insult in some situations.

Waste

Out of respect for your hosts, be careful not to waste anything you can reasonably avoid wasting such as paper goods and food.