

Travel Tip: Tourist Etiquette for Japan



Japan is different than this country. Big surprise. If you visit, you'll notice that in so many ways that are obvious, but there are some ways that aren't so obvious. If a trip to Japan is in your future, here are some tips to help you fit in, or at least avoid standing out like the typical American tourist.

1. Japan is a culture built on quiet respect. Loud rowdy tourism is looked down on, and confrontation avoided. Don't be the typical demanding tourist that does nothing but complain about how different everything is from what you are used to.
2. Bowing is a common courtesy that you'll see everywhere you go in Japan. Flight attendants will bow to passengers after giving their pre-flight safety briefing, and vendors will bow to their customers. There is a protocol to bowing amongst Japanese, but it is full of nuance that Americans can't hope to master, and they don't expect you to. It is customary to bow in greeting and you should feel free to do so. Just don't stick your hand out for a handshake, or touch someone. Intimate gestures that we take for granted, like a pat on the back or shoulder, are unwelcome in Japan.
3. Remove your shoes when indoors. This applies to visiting guests in their homes, and in smaller public venues like restaurants, not so much in museums or stores. Take your lead from others. House slippers are provided for guests where shoe removal is expected.
4. You pack your own trash. You won't find many public trash cans or waste bins...you are expected to bring along a bag and pack your own trash out. Likewise, bring your own bag to carry anything you purchase...some vendors will supply bags, but most don't.
5. Japanese toilets are strange. And wonderful. Toilets in Japan range from very basic to elaborate affairs with heated seats and built-in music, ventilation, bidets, and air dryers for your private parts. Take advantage of the fancy ones when you can and don't be ashamed to linger a bit.
6. Pack your own paper towels and hand towels. Public restrooms won't have paper towels to dry your hands, restaurants don't offer napkins, and hotels may not supply hand towels to wash with, so you'll need to pack your own and pack them out when you leave. It is also a good idea to bring along some TP when you are touring, just in case.
7. Make the effort to learn some basic Japanese phrases and don't be afraid to use them. Even if your pronunciation is less than perfect, and it will be, Japanese people will appreciate you for trying.

8. Shrines. Visiting one of the many shrines you'll encounter is a great way to experience Japanese culture. Shrines are a place for quiet reflection so act accordingly. Unless otherwise posted, photos are OK in the open areas of shrines but are prohibited in any area under cover. There is an etiquette to using the prayer cards, ribbons, or pebbles that most shrines offer. It is acceptable for outsiders to exercise the local prayer traditions regardless of your own religion, but you should make sure you do it properly. Watch what others do and follow their lead if you wish to indulge in the tradition. When I visit shrines, I choose not to engage in the prayer rituals out of respect for the differences between our respective religions, and that too is acceptable.
9. You may encounter Geisha or Maiko (an apprentice Geisha), in your travels, particularly around the shrines. In most cases it is rude to ask them to if you can take their picture, and even more rude to take one without asking. There are exceptions, particularly when it is clear the individuals are providing a photo op as I experienced during my first visit to the Asukasa shrine in Tokyo. But for the most part, avoid taking pictures of the Geisha, tempting though it will be.
10. You don't need to worry about gratuities in Japan. Tipping of any sort is not expected and may be considered rude. The exception is if you are traveling with an organized tour group...check with the tour operator if you are unsure.
11. Business cards and currency are given and received with two hands and a slight bow. Money does not pass from hand to hand...you will find a tray at each cash register where you are expected to lay your cash or credit card down. The proprietor will pick it up and then return your receipt, card, or change back to the tray and you then pick it up from there. While this is their tradition and it is appropriate to follow, vendors in tourist areas are understanding that it is not our tradition. They won't refuse your money if you forget and try to hand it to them directly, though they may point to the tray on the counter and hope you take the hint.
12. Wear a mask. Mask usage on trains is required and it is expected in most public places, even outdoors. Be sure you wear it properly, with the mask covering your mouth and nose fully. Seasonal mask usage was common in Japan long before COVID. With such population density, face mask use is seen as a common courtesy to be respected and followed rather than an unwelcome government mandate to be ignored. If you can't live with the idea of masking up properly in public places, stay home.

And That's a Wrap

While this may make a trip to Japan seem like a lot of work, it isn't. You'll find yourself quickly falling into the habits that the Japanese take for granted, and if you slip don't worry about it. Nobody will call you on it. You might even find some new habits worth bringing home.