

CUSTOMS AND ETIQUETTE

Whether coming to Japan to live with a host family, or getting a place of your own, there will likely be a time where you are invited to eat together with a Japanese household. There are some subtle and some not so subtle differences between the customs and etiquette of Japan compared with that overseas. Are *you* up to scratch with your Japanese etiquette?

Bow

Knowing how to bow correctly is an important Japanese custom. As you may know, a bow is often used instead of a handshake for greetings. In addition, it is also used to express thank you, excuse me, and to humble oneself. Always bow lower and longer than your superiors. As a resident from abroad you will be forgiven for poor bowing etiquette and rewarded for making the effort. Men bow with their hands at their sides; women, hands in front.

Handshake

In general, do not extend your hand first to be shook, though some Japanese like to shake hands with exotic folk. If you do find yourself shaking hands, be careful. Japanese may find a firm handshake less than pleasant. Follow their lead, except when teaching students how to shake hands properly.

Shoes

In Japan people remove their shoes when entering a house, school, or any place with *tatami* (straw mats). This includes your apartment. When visiting somebody's home, take off your shoes in the *genkan* (entrance way) and place them neatly with the toes facing the door. Slippers are usually provided for you in a house, but these should be removed before entering the *tatami* room.

In schools, as a guest you will likely be offered slippers to wear, but as staff you generally require a pair of "indoor shoes." These can be any comfortable shoes that have never been worn outside. They may be inspected. You may also want a pair of indoor athletic shoes for the gym (these can be the same shoes as your working shoes, if you want). "Outdoor" athletic shoes are needed for outdoor sports. Each school will provide you with a shoe locker. Please note that the wooden boards you will often see in the entryway of schools, etc. are considered indoor.

Again, never wear shoes or slippers on *tatami*, don't step on the threshold in temples or old homes, and, perhaps most important, toilet slippers are for the toilet only.

Visiting Somebody's Home

You will undoubtedly be offered several invitations to visit homes. People in Japan are very hospitable and enjoy entertaining guests from overseas. When invited, it is customary to bring a small, wrapped gift as a sign of appreciation.

As mentioned above, always remove your shoes in the *genkan* before stepping into the home area. Change into slippers if they are provided. Umbrellas and coats should also be left in this area. Before entering someone else's home, say *o-jama shimasu* (excuse me for entering your

home).

Remain in the area where they bring you. Don't wander around, especially in the kitchen. People are extremely gracious and formal hosts and may become embarrassed if guests try to help or see the product before it is finished. Presentation is everything!

The Toilet

It sounds a little crude, but "toilet" is the main word used in Japan. *Toire wa doko desu ka?* (Where's the bathroom?) Surely the most important phrase you will need. The bathroom, that is the room with the bath, is often separate from the toilet. Japanese style toilets are quite different from western toilets. At first they may seem confusing and uncomfortable, but you may come to prefer the Japanese style in public restrooms. While the floor is usually gross, you don't have to touch anything.

Basically, a Japanese style toilet is a urinal in the ground with a flush. Straddle the hole and squat facing the flush handle and toilet paper. Don't make the mistake of so many people who ask: "Why is the toilet paper so far behind you?" Basic rule of thumb: the lower you go the less you have to worry about aim.

Actually, many public restrooms as well as homes have western style toilets. When you go to someone's house, toilet slippers are usually provided. First remove the house slippers at the door and step into the bathroom slippers. Don't forget to leave the bathroom slippers turned around for the next person after you are finished. It can be pretty awkward to watch bumbling guests parade around the house wearing the toilet slippers!

Sometimes the bathroom is co-ed. This means there may be a urinal and a toilet stall in the same room. Don't be surprised to walk out of the toilet stall and see a man relieving himself! Public toilets may not have toilet paper or towels to dry your hands on so it is always a good idea to carry a packet of tissues and a handkerchief. Also, many public toilets don't have doors and the urinal can be in plain sight of the public walking past outside.

Bathing

In your own apartment you can do whatever you want, but at a hotel or at an *onsen* (hot spring), or at someone's home, you should know how to bathe correctly. Japanese style bathtubs are not for washing, rather for soaking and relaxing. Your body must be thoroughly scrubbed before you enter the tub.

The tub is filled once a day and the whole family shares the bath water. This means it is very important to be totally clean first. Remove any hair, etc. from the water. Do not drain the water when you are finished. If there is a cover provided, place it over the tub to keep the water hot for the next person.

Before you soak you must wash yourself. There will be a small stool and washbowl. Sit facing the wall/shower/mirror and fill your bowl with water. Do not leave the water running. You will be given a long towel for soaping and scrubbing. You can also use this time to wash your hair, shave, brush your teeth, etc. Finally, rinse off, clean your washbowl and stool, and enjoy your

soak. After soaking, another scrub is common in the *onsen*.

Eating

Always say *itadakimasu* (loosely translated: thank you for this food) before you begin eating and *gochisosama deshita* when you are finished. If an *oshibori* (wet towel) is given to you before a meal, wipe your hands with it first. This is not to be mistaken for a napkin, which don't exist here in the way you know them. For this reason, it is always a good idea to carry a handkerchief or pocket tissues (given out everywhere for free). Typically, Japanese dishes are served on numerous small plates. Lift the plate in one hand up to your mouth and eat with the other, especially when eating rice. Avoid putting soy sauce on your rice. This can be considered a rude practice associated with the poor in olden days. Everything is eaten, especially at school. Don't be concerned if Japanese (men especially) eat with their mouths open, slurp their food or belch at the table. Slurping noodles is good, slurping soup is not good.

***O-Hashi* – Chopsticks**

There are several rules for using these. Do not leave them sticking out of your food, as this is the way food is offered to the dead. It is however okay to rest them on the rims of bowls or plates. Never pass food from one person's chopsticks to another. This is another funeral ritual in which a dead person's bones are handled. Don't stir your soup with them, but feel free to use them to fish out the yummy lumps of tofu. When taking food from a common dish, use the opposite end of your chopsticks (unless someone tells you differently). Learn how to use them correctly. Everyone will watch you eat and comment persistently on how well you can or can't use chopsticks for the remainder of all eternity and beyond.

***Enkai* – Official Parties**

Enkai have strict rules. Why? Because it wouldn't be a party without them! First, wait for others to sit down before you do. Never pour your own drink, as it will be filled by someone else and, in turn, you are expected to fill others' glasses. Wait for the *kampai* (cheers) before you take your first sip. When offered another drink hold your glass as the drink is poured, take a token sip, then immediately serve the person in the same manner. Keep filling your neighbors' drinks. Get drunk, fall down, etc. If you prefer to abstain, keep your glass full.

***Omiyage* – Gift Giving**

Gift giving has been an elaborate social ritual in Japan for centuries. Gifts are given to express gratitude for past or continuing favors, in anticipation of future favors or services, to show respect for a superior, or in return for gifts previously received. At times you will feel that you are on a gift giving treadmill because you will constantly be exchanging small gifts with the same people over and over for all eternity and beyond.

If you are visiting a friend's home for the first time, after a long interval, or at a festive season, you should take a small gift such as wine or sweets. If you travel to a different city or country it is customary to bring back gifts for your friends, staff, etc. Food unique to the area you visited make popular *omiyage* and is normally sold at the local train station and other *omiyage*-specialty stores.

Usually gifts should be wrapped. Many stores will wrap them for you. If you wrap it yourself,

anything but white is okay. White wrapping is associated with funeral rituals. It is not customary to open presents when they are offered but rather to take them home unopened or to open them once the guests have departed. If you are given a gift, don't open it unless you are asked to do so or you ask if it is alright to do so. Likewise, if you give a gift, do not expect the recipient to open it in front of you. Non-food items can be stored and passed on to the next person that does you a favor!

At the Office

- * Don't move objects or shut drawers with your feet.
- * Don't sit on desks.
- * Don't chew gum (although, this is changing).

Miscellaneous

- * Bra straps mustn't show.
- * You can never say *sumimasen* (excuse me or I'm sorry) too many times.
- * Walking and eating at the same time is considered rude (although this too is changing).