

Ten little things that Japan does differently

By Sarah Britten

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Travel is good for creativity, it forces you to look at the world with fresh eyes - and few countries are as both as strange and familiar as Japan. I'm not talking manga, or Kano or even sliced raw horse meat - it's the small differences that were most intriguing. On a recent trip to Tokyo, these were the subtly - and not so subtly - different little things that stood out for me.

1. Masks. In Japan, it is perfectly normal to wear a mask in public - and many people do. I could never work out whether it was because they were carrying a germ or afraid that they'd pick one up from someone else. Masks were for sale in packs of three in many corner shops.



2. Pillows. Pillows in Japan are not the pillows we know in South Africa. For one thing, they're filled with little balls made of either plastic or wood. The hotel where we stayed in Tokyo offered seven different additional pillow choices in the lobby downstairs, complete with diagrams outlining height and hardness.



3. Vending machines. Japan is a land of vending machines. They are everywhere - up side streets, outside stores, tucked into corners of shopping malls and lurking on station platforms. Most carry a combination of water, a few carbonated soft drinks, iced coffee (hugely popular in Japan) and iced tea, but some include beer or whisky mixers too.



4. Baths. In Japan, you shower before you take a bath. Baths are for soaking in, not cleaning. In our hotel in Shinjuku, rooms were provided with a shower, while public baths were located on the second floor, complete with a timetable limiting access to all men or all women every two hours. Female guests were provided with a door code to access them.

5. Hotels. Almost all the hotels we saw offered a choice of two different types of accommodation: stay overnight, or rest for an hour or two (whether this was code for something else was not clear). And, unlike South Africa where hotels usually offer shampoo, conditioner and body lotion, Japanese hotels offer free toothbrushes. By the time we left our hotel in Tokyo, we had accumulated eight of them.

6. Lace doilies. Those lace doilies your granny used to keep on the back of the sofa? They're big in Japan, especially as car seat covers. (This is the uber car we used to get to Shinjuku station.) Lace is also popular with young Japanese women, who like to combine it with pearls, pantyhose and sneakers.



7. Animals. Because most people don't have the space to keep pets, animal cafes in have flourished in Tokyo. I Googled "owl and lizard café" as a joke, and found one a short walk from Koenji Station. At Café Baron we ate lunch with two great grey owls, a Eurasian eagle owl, a barn owl and two monitor lizards. Sometimes, the animals will come to you - as in the case of man who brought a stroller filled with six Persian cats to a busy street corner in Harajuku.



8. Menus. Japanese menus rely on photographs, which means that you don't need to share a language - just smile and point to what you want. Sometimes, though, it's better not to know what you're eating.



9. Kit Kat. Kit Kat in Japan has evolved in strange and wonderful ways. Apart from common or garden chocolate, you can get it in strawberry cheesecake, raspberry, green tea, and wasabi. I kid you not. (I tried the wasabi; it's not bad, but it's definitely an acquired taste).



10. Toilets. When I first arrived in Tokyo, I was convinced that I needed a degree in astrophysics to operate the toilets. There is no such thing as a piece of porcelain with a lid that flushes when you press a lever. Oh no. Japanese toilets will douche, spray, dry and even play sounds to hide bathroom noises. You will never look at toilets in the same way after using a Japanese one.

And finally ...



The one thing that didn't surprise me in Tokyo was Godzilla. If you looked hard enough, you could find him. At least some things made sense.

ABOUT SARAH BRITTEN

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