

Mike's Japan



Free Sake & Sex

by

Mike Dixon

I have lots of Japanese friends and I often visit them in Japan. I have noticed that the conversation flows more freely after a few glasses of sake. I then get to hear about things I might not otherwise know. The stories in this book were written to entertain and provide travel advice. Updated October 2013.

Mike's website: <http://mikejdixon.com>

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1 Country and people



The islands of Japan stretch down the Asian mainland from latitude 45° to 25°, almost exactly the same as the east coast of the USA. The distance from the tip of Hokkaido in the north to Okinawa in the far south is about the same as from Halifax to Miami. It is equivalent to going from Bordeaux to the Canary Islands.

In winter, icebergs come down from the Baring Straits and the sea freezes in northern Hokkaido. In Okinawa the weather is still hot and balmy.

The main island of Honshu has the sort of weather normally associated with continental climates. Snow is not unusual in Tokyo in winter and uncomfortably hot conditions are the norm in summer.

The history of Japan has similarities with northern Europe. Just as the northern Europeans derived much of their culture from Rome so the Japanese took a lot of theirs from the Chinese. This shows in the written language. Japanese is totally different from Chinese. As a consequence, Chinese characters have to be supplemented by a syllabary (sort of alphabet) when used to write Japanese. The

result is a complicated mess that has become even messier with the use of the Roman alphabet in recent years.

Written Japanese is a language in itself and this is a major obstacle to reform. The Chinese characters often convey subtle meanings which cannot be expressed in words. Reading Japanese is (even for Japanese) a bit like doing a translation job. More than one reading is possible.

Japan sits on the Pacific Ring of Fire and owes its very existence to volcanoes. It is situated slightly to the west of the junction of the Asian tectonic plate and the Pacific plate. The latter dips down as it makes its way northwards and pushes under the Asian plate. A lot of melting takes place when this happens and lava forces its way to the surface.

No matter where you go in Japan, you will find volcanoes. They stick up along the spine of the country and have created a mountainous landscape with few flat areas suitable for habitation. Japan is an immensely crowded country in some places and sparsely populated in others.

As you travel around, you will see small paddy fields kept alive by government subsidies. Elsewhere, highly efficient market gardens are using the latest technologies to produce fruit and vegetables.

Ancient shrines and temples dot the countryside. The "English garden" with flowers is becoming more common but many people stick to the traditional garden of shrubs and manicured trees.

Forests cover the mountains. Many are plantations. Others are natural. The display of autumn colours is spectacular and city folk flock out to admire it. The mountain roads are often very crowded at that time of year.

A few old castles survive from the past. Where they have been destroyed, concrete replicas are often built and used as museums.

Modern urban life is vibrant in Japan. You will find museums, art galleries and workshops specialising in arts and crafts. Dining out is an everyday experience for many inner city folk and whole areas of the larger towns are given over to restaurants. The youth culture is alive and well. Japanese girls love to dress up and parade with their friends. Fashions change from week to week.

2 Getting around



There was a time when you had to speak Japanese to travel in Japan and you needed a fat wallet. Those days have gone but the myth remains. My wife and I are frequent visitors to the country. Recently (Oct 2013) we took advantage of cheap airfares and went touring in Kyushu in the south-west of the country. We

landed in Fukuoka, rented a car and were in beautiful scenery within a few hours.

Japan is mainly mountains. To borrow a phrase from Mark Twain: Japan would be a mighty big country if it were ironed flat. We stayed in country inns when we could find one and headed down into the valleys when we couldn't. The valleys are packed with towns and there's usually a cluster of business hotels around the railway stations, which are easy to find.

In the previous addition of this guide, I gave the price of a business hotel as about 10,000 yen (US\$100) a night for two people. That has changed in the past two years. Prices have come down. To our amazement we discovered perfectly acceptable hotels at 6000 yen per night.

Country inns are more expensive but an evening meal is often included. The cost per night for two was usually about 10,000 yen. Breakfast and evening meals cost a very reasonable 1000 to 1500 yen.

On my wife's birthday we indulged ourselves and stayed in a hot spring spa which we had previously considered outside our price range. The cost per night for two people, including a lavish breakfast and evening meal, was 22,300 yen (about US\$230). The cost back home in Australia would have been double that. Japan has become a relatively cheap place to visit.

Car hire prices haven't changed and are about the same as in most developed countries. Restaurants continue to offer good food at affordable prices. Traditional cuisine is being replaced by a Japanese version of Western fast food in the big centres but is still the norm in country areas.

My wife speaks fluent Japanese and we usually take a train to where we are going to start our tour. We leave the railway station and shop around in the car hire places that are to be found near most big stations.

If you don't speak Japanese, use the car hire counters at the airport and take a train to where you want to pick up the car. An international driving licence will be needed together with your national licence. The Japanese drive on the left and use the same international road signs as in most countries. Drinking and driving is strictly prohibited.

If you don't speak Japanese, stick to hotels or use the inn groups that cater for foreign guests. Major credit cards are accepted for the payment of bills in most places but don't place total reliance on bankcards to access money (whatever your bank might say).

A few years ago we used our bankcards to draw out cash from ATMs in convenience stores. That is no longer possible. Non-Japanese bankcards are no longer recognised by ATMs in shops. And, ATMs in banks often refuse to accept them. Two years ago we wasted a lot of time going from bank to bank to get money and didn't succeed until we got to Tokyo.

My photograph (above) shows what to expect if you decide to take a Japanese style room. Most inns have them in addition to Western style rooms. Western is the norm in business hotels and most tourist hotels.

In Japanese style rooms you sleep on futons which are laid out on the floor at night. You sit on cushions or low chairs, which are usually provided for foreigners. Tea and biscuits are free and meals are often served in rooms as well as in the restaurant. If you stay in the inns that advertise on the web pages listed below, you will usually have a choice of both Japanese and Western food.

Inn groups that cater for non-Japanese speakers: *Japaneseinnngroup.com* and *www.itcj.jp*

3 Finding a place to eat



Food is becoming faster and increasingly Westernised in Japan. As a Japanese friend remarked: it's what happens when everyone wants to go to work and no one wants to stay at home and do the cooking.

As a visitor, you will have little trouble finding a hamburger joint or a place that sells chicken and chips (French fries). At the same time, there is no shortage of good, old-fashioned, Japanese fast-food. The noodle bars and sushi trains are still doing a brisk trade and they are cheap.

Eating out is cheap in Japan compared with most developed countries. The problem for a non-Japanese speaker is to find what you want. Hamburger and chicken fry are easy because the signs are impossible to miss. Noodle bars and restaurants present a greater challenge.

The more interesting eating establishments aren't obvious. If you want something more exciting than a place where office workers go at midday, look for paper lanterns. They usually indicate that the proprietors have gone out of their way to create a bit of atmosphere.

Let's suppose you have located a suitable place. If it's a hamburger joint it will be like anywhere else. You merely go to the counter and point at a picture on the wall. If it's a noodle bar, there's so little choice it hardly matters. If it's a beer hall, it's easy. They have menus with pictures and prices in the straightforward (1,2,3 ...) numerals that everyone can read.

Beer halls are my favourites. The staff dress like pirates. Many are students. There's a lot of yelling when new customers arrive, gongs sound and raffle tickets are drawn from a jar (in the better establishments). You can order small amounts and take time eating while you down a few beers. The choice is so wide that even fussy palates can be satisfied.

Restaurants present the real challenge. You think that everything is straightforward but you are wrong. You have been fooled by the plastic displays in the window. They show the dishes you can order and many are highly realistic. Then you realise that the names are in Japanese and there are no numbers beside them. I speak a primitive form of Japanese and can understand the odd written word yet I'm sometimes forced to take staff outside and point to a dish in the window.

The problem doesn't end there. For some annoying reason, many restaurants feel obliged to give prices in an old fashioned script that you don't see anywhere else except in Shinto temples and funeral parlours. Mercifully, it's simpler than Roman

numerals. Each character corresponds to a numeral normal people use. So if there are three of them you know the price is less than 1000 yen. It helps to remember that one horizontal stroke corresponds to 1, two strokes make 2 and three make 3. After that it gets more difficult.

When I'm in Tokyo, I often eat in the shopping area below Tokyo Station. There's a vast expanse of streets down there and most are packed with restaurants. The main customers are office workers so I try to avoid the midday break. Ten years ago, most served Japanese meals. Now, I'm having difficulty finding a place that does not serve a Japanese version of Western food. If you want to eat Western (or something like it), Tokyo Station could be the place for you.

My picture (above) was taken at a friend's place. We gathered for a sakura party (cherry blossom party) and it started to snow, which was totally extraordinary for the time of year. Snowflakes were getting into the beer and the girls were complaining of the cold so we went into the garden house. This was built in the old style with a charcoal hearth for cooking. Our host put on the gear he keeps for this sort of occasion and we got on with the festivities. He emailed me, following last year's terrible earthquake, to say that the family had gone through the ordeal without injury but the old building in the garden had collapsed together with many other stone structures in the district.

4 Narita stopover



A lot of people break their journey at Narita, which is Japan's main airport and about an hour away from the centre of Tokyo by train. There are various possibilities.

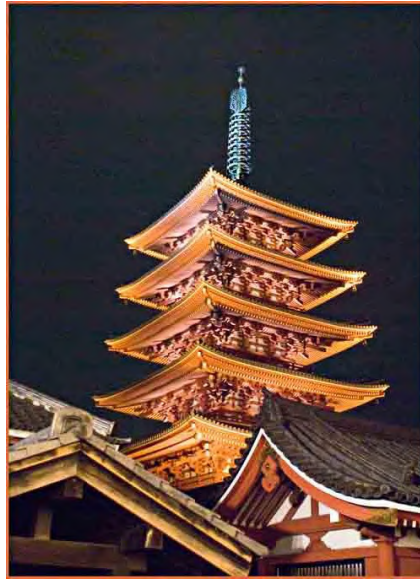
You can check into the airline hotel at the edge of the airport and eat in the hotel restaurant with a whole lot of other international travellers. Alternatively, you can book in and take the next hotel bus to Narita city.

Most buses stop at the main railway station and you can walk through it to the top of the high street, which is packed with tourist shops and eating houses. You can choose to dine there with other tourists or you can hunt out the places where the locals eat.

My preference is for the beer halls near the station. They are in high-rise buildings and you have to look at the advertising signs to find them. The signs are lavishly illustrated and written in both Japanese and English so you will have no difficulty. The beer halls sell drinks and snacks from an illustrated menu. All you have to do is point and hold up one or more fingers to show how many items you want. Needless to say, places in Narita are accustomed to serving people who can't speak Japanese.

If you have time, stroll down the high street to the magnificent temple gardens at the bottom. These are shut after sunset so you might consider spending a second night in Narita in order to see them. You could also take a trip into Tokyo.

5 Tokyo



I have friends who left well-paid jobs in Tokyo for a more relaxed lifestyle elsewhere but they make frequent trips back. It's a great place to visit. Whether you are a teenage tearaway or a serious-minded intellectual, you'll not be disappointed. There's a lot to turn you on so long as you have time to enjoy it.

When my wife and I go to Tokyo we generally stay in one of the many inns that specialise in taking foreign guests. You can look them up on the internet at japaneseinnsgroup.com and www.itcj.jp. Most inns have rooms with beds as well as rooms with tatami mats and futons on the floor. If you book into a hotel, you get a room with a bed. Our preference is for something in the old style.

On our last two visits we stayed in Asakusa. That's a famous temple area (photo, above) and it has a lot of character. I'm reminded of parts of London that have retained something of their Cockney heritage. There are stalls selling things, guys with rickshaws touting for customers, priests and nuns, flower markets and lots of temples.

During the day, Asakusa is overrun with tourists. When night falls the tourists leave and the atmosphere changes. Side streets light up. Shutters are opened. Tables are brought out onto pavements and suddenly it's like a small town where everyone knows one another and every night is party night.

Getting around in Tokyo is easy. You go to the nearest Metro station and take a train. Timetables and maps are in Western (ABC) script as well as Japanese. You can buy a ticket from a machine or use the ticket office. Many railway staff know enough English to tell you what to do. If you look suitably lost, there's a fair chance some nice person will come to your aid.

If you want to take a look at top apartment stores and chic restaurants then the Ginza is the place for you. For the latest in electronic wizardry, go to Akihabara. If you want to see where the kids have their rave parties, try Shibuya and Harajuku. The photo on the cover was taken at Shibuya.

The nation's top art galleries and museums are at Ueno. You will also find the ancient shrine of the Tokugawa family (of Shogun fame) in the park there. The famous Ueno markets are next to Ueno station. Hang on to your wallet and see if you can spot any Yakuza.

Sumo enthusiasts should visit Ryogoko, which is where the wrestlers live. Go just after breakfast when they are walking to their training sessions in full regalia. You'll make the day of some young guy if you photograph him and ask for his autograph.

For books, private art galleries, and shops selling old prints and manuscripts go to leafy Kanda.

6 Daytrip to Nikko



Nikko is up in the mountains to the north of Tokyo and is famous for its temples and gardens. The royal family had a country retreat there and it is open to visitors.

Use the train to get there. The station is in the high street and an easy stroll takes you to the main attractions, past numerous tourist shops and restaurants. I advise you not to take a car unless you go in midwinter. Finding a place to park can be a nightmare.

The natural scenery is magnificent. A huge, ornamental lake flows into a gorge down a waterfall that freezes in winter. Dress warmly if you go at that time of year. We visited Nikko in winter, having left a North Queensland summer, and spent most of our time huddled beside a fire in a restaurant.

The mountains around the lake are covered in majestic trees. These tower above huge boulders and are an important feature of the temple gardens.

Don't forget your camera. You could spend an entire day taking photographs. The temples, royal holiday palace, lake, waterfall, sacred bridge and other attractions deserve your attention.

Daytrip to Mt Fuji



Mount Fuji is to the west of Tokyo and visible from the nation's capital on a clear day. It is Japan's highest mountain at 3,776 m (12,385 ft) and is snow-capped throughout the year.

Fuji is one of those rare volcanoes which looks like a volcano when seen from any angle. It is one of the world's most famous volcanos and one of the most beautiful.

To see it close up, get on a train to Fuji Yoshida. The town is an ancient pilgrimage centre for the mountain. It is a bit rundown following the collapse of the Japanese textile industry when factories relocated to cheap-labour countries. But, the old shrines and viewing spots are still there.

If you want to go up the mountain, get back on the train and continue to the next stop. There's a gigantic amusement park there and you can't miss it. Buses leave from outside the station and drive through the forested area at the base of the mountain to the start of the cinder cone. There's a visitors centre where you can have a coffee and learn how the volcano works. You can also press on further up the mountain.

Guides with ponies will take you part way. You can also join the hardy types who trudge to the very top. You will, of course, have to come fully prepared with the necessary climbing gear if you want to do that.

8 Hiking in Japan



We call it bush walking in Australia and they call it mountain walking. By any name, it's a popular recreation in Japan and well organised.

Japan has an extensive system of National Parks with trails to suit all tastes from the casual walker to the hiking enthusiast. Parking, toilet and other facilities are provided and there's no shortage of maps and helpful signs for those who can read them.

Hiking in Japan is much the same as in other countries but there are notable differences. One is the virtual absence of campsites. My wife and I have hunted for them and occasionally found one, only to discover that it is reserved for youth groups. We've spoken to hikers about this and have received a mixed reaction. Some are amazed that anyone over the age of twenty would want to sleep in a cabin or tent. Others say there is no law to stop you sleeping on a mountainside and that's what they do.

Another notable difference is wildlife. In Australia, where I live, it is important to keep an eye out for snakes and crocodiles. In Japan it's bears, boars and monkeys. The Japanese National Parks people are highly protective of the furry creatures in their care and some of them venture surprisingly close to cities.

I recently photographed the warning sign (above) about bears. I came upon it in a park about 100 km from Tokyo and showed it to friends who live nearby. The wife refused to believe there were bears in the park, claiming that the wildlife service puts the signs up to attract tourists. Her husband assured me that the bears are real and have to be taken seriously.

We wear bear bells when we go hiking in Japan. They jingle and let the bears know we are coming. That way they don't get taken by surprise, which can be bad for their nerves and lead to dangerous defensive behaviour. I stomp around when I go bush walking at home in Australia. That way the snakes know I'm coming and get out of my way.

Japanese hiking gear is much the same as elsewhere but you will occasionally see people dressed in a far older style. They are pilgrims making their way between mountain shrines. The traditional gear is white tunic, straw hat and straw sandals. A

few hardy types keep to the rules but many compromise on footwear and wear modern climbing boots.

You don't have to climb to get to the top of many peaks. There's no shortage of cable cars and mountain railways. And there are lots of places to leave the track for a meal with friends.

For information on Japanese national parks visit: www.bes.jp/english/parks/system.html

9 Gods and temples



Like much of Europe, Japan is essentially secular when it comes to religion. The country is home to Confucianism, Buddhism and Shinto. The last of these is, in a sense, the national religion. It is uniquely Japanese and I spent some time trying to work out what it's all about.

I began by asking Japanese friends and got nowhere. At first, I thought they were reticent about discussing personal beliefs. Then I realised they knew as much about Shinto as I know about mistletoe, Christmas trees, wishing wells and Easter eggs.

I would ask a question like: Why do you hang out lanterns on a certain day? And I would get an answer like: That's what we do.

I guess that if I was asked: Why do you kiss under mistletoe? I would answer in much the same way.

My friend Tim McHugh, who is a science fiction writer, put me right on the subject. Tim got to know the local Shinto priests in the district where he lives with his Japanese wife, Toshimi. In doing so he became an enthusiast for Shinto.

Tim explained that it is one of those ancient religions that sees all parts of the cosmos as connected. We are part of the cosmos and must harmonise with it: not just on the physical plane but on a wider spiritual plane. That's what Shinto helps us to do. Okay. I take the point. I guess that some of us have that sort of feeling when we decorate trees at Christmas and paint eggs at Easter.

There are two sorts of temples in Japan: Buddhist and Shinto. Very occasionally you find Buddhist shrines in Shinto temples and vice versa.

You will see images of gods and devils in both. I get conflicting views on whether they are meant to exist and have heard similar arguments about saints and angels when religion is discussed in Christian countries.

10 Cherry Blossom



The Japanese word for cherry is *sakura*. The entire country is planted with them. When the trees are in flower, the display is spectacular. Like Christmas in the West, it is a time of year when people get together. Individuals and businesses hold parties. People are obliged to socialise when their inclination might be otherwise, which can be both a good and a bad thing.

Cherry blossom viewing is difficult to avoid if you live in Japan. If you like flowers, it's a great time to visit the countryside. If you are a student of human behaviour, there is a lot to see.

Offices arrange parties and staff feel bound to turn up. You can see them in the parks, sitting beneath the trees. Some will be viewing the blooms with eyes attuned to the beauty of nature. Others will be swigging beer and stuffing themselves with potato crisps. It takes all sorts to make a world and no one can escape the sakura parties.

Sakura time starts in early spring in the south of the country and several weeks later in the north. Be aware that weekends can be very busy. People are off work and have time to take part in the festivities. We make a point of securing our weekend accommodation well in advance.

We are invited to Sakura parties most years but rarely make the trip from Australia. Last year was an exception. We saw an unbelievably low air fare on the internet and grabbed it before it could vanish. We arrived on April 6 and got in two parties during the next two weeks. One was near Mount Fuji and the other about 100 kilometres up the coast from Tokyo. The second party was abandoned due to snow and we retreated indoors.

My photograph was taken in the hills to the south of Tokyo. The display of blossom is fine but by no means exceptional. A lot depends on the weather and time of day. Timing is essential. The petals begin to fall soon after they come out.

11 Hot spring baths



They are an institution in Japan, which is not surprising because the country is overrun with volcanoes. The mist in mountain gullies is often not mist at all. It's steam rising from cracks in the ground. And that smell of bad eggs has nothing to do with eggs. It's sulphur dioxide ... the price you pay for having a continual supply of hot water.

Many country inns have hot spring baths and these are usually private. Spas have big pools as well as private baths. Bathing is done with clothes off and most pools are segregated. A few allow mixed bathing.

Whether you bathe privately or with others it is important to wash first. The hot spring baths in the inns may look like big wash tubs but they are not for that purpose. A washroom is always provided and you use that first. You will find low stools and bowls for hot water. Squat on a stool, smear yourself with soap, scrub thoroughly then take a shower to get rid of the soap.

Spas provide minuscule towels. They serve three needs. The first is modesty. Bathing costumes are not allowed and many bathers feel the need for some sort of covering as they make their way from the washroom to the side of the pool. The second reason is advertising. The resort's name is on the towels and customers are expected to souvenir them. The third reason is drying but how you dry with such a small item beats me.

Some young guys told me about a fabulous spa they used to visit before the municipality shut it down. Their account was given in Japanese and no one was game to call on my wife or any of the other ladies for an accurate translation so I may have got a few details wrong.

As far as I can make out entry was, on certain nights, restricted to older teenagers. There were separate washrooms but bathing was mixed. The girls stripped off and got in at one end and the boys did the same at the other. There was a rope at the halfway mark and the bathers were allowed to swim to it and talk. Underwater viewing masks were banned and touching was strictly out.

I'm aware of fundamental errors in my command of the Japanese language. However, there are limits to my mistakes. I sometimes confuse left and right. I'm sure that I never confuse male and female. So, unless I got the whole thing hopelessly back-to-front, it was the girls who started touching and that was the cause of the fuss.

A journalist with one of the local newspapers claimed that the young ladies ran a competition to see how many boys they could touch, awarding points according to where contact was made. The article caused an outcry of indignation from parent and

teacher organisations. The licensing authority made threatening noises and the spa's owners were obliged to insert a second rope, a couple of metres back from the first.

That didn't work. Some of the girls were top swimmers and upped their scores with record-breaking, breath-hold dives. In the end, the spa was required to impose fully segregated bathing for all young people and that was very bad for business. It was already struggling and the further restrictions forced it to close.

The whole thing reminded me of an episode in Townsville, where I had my backpacker hostel. A beer garden was holding mud-wrestling competitions for buxom girls in floppy tops and the local wowsers (Aussie for killjoys) got the whole thing stopped. One lady even picketed the place and that was bad for business. You can read about the sad incident in my book *Free Beer and Sex*.

12 Love Hotels



Other countries have rooms for rent by the hour. Japan does it to extremes. Lovers don't have to put up with rickety beds and dingy surroundings. Nor do they have to worry about hidden cameras. The cameras in love hotels are not hidden. They are clearly visible and operated by handsets. You can record your memorable moments for posterity.

Let's suppose you are a student living with mum and dad in a posh part of Nara West. It's most unlikely that your socially conscious parents will approve of you taking a girl back to your room. The neighbours might get to hear about it and that could lead to all sorts of malicious gossip.

The fleshpots of wicked Osaka are just down the road. They're half-an-hour away on the train. You and your beloved can nip down for a harmless get together and be back before anyone knows you've gone.

You arrive in Osaka and head for the hotel district. There are business hotels, tourist hotels and the sort of hotel you are looking for. You fancy a place that is themed with Dungeons and Dragons but your companion turns it down, saying a friend of hers had some very bad experiences there. Pirates of the Caribbean is your next choice but she doesn't fancy making love in the rigging of a fake galleon. Her preference is for a place across the road.

You enter through a side door and are relieved to discover that the lighting is dimmed and there is no reception desk. A mechanical voice greets you and a flashing machine asks for your credit card. The prices are a bit steep and you wonder if you can get a loan from your father. You could say you need it to buy books. At any rate, you are not going to bail out now. You are with the hottest chick in town and there's no turning back.

Your companion points to a picture of a 1950s car. The price is mid-range and you hastily prod the picture before her fancy turns to something more expensive. The picture fades and a message appears saying you have successfully completed the transaction. Your credit card is returned. Lights flash on the floor and illuminated arrows guide you to your room.

A shining automobile stands on a thick shag carpet. You take a step forward and the air is filled with the sound of Elvis. You take another and the vehicle opens up. The roof lifts back and the seats unfold to form a double bed.

Condoms hang in packets from the windscreen. Your companion reaches towards them. They come in different sizes and she wants to know which to pick. You are tempted to say *Jumbo* but have been warned about the perils of a loose fit. *Slim* is the manufacturer's way of saying *Small*. There's no way you are going to say *Slim*. That leaves *Standard*. Then she asks about flavour. That's something you hadn't thought of and you are struggling for a reply when she chooses *Peppermint*.

Buttons on the dashboard have to be set before you begin. There's a selection of 1950s records. You choose *Rock Around the Clock* and go on to the next step. It's worse than downloading a file from the internet. There's always something else to be done. You set the humidity control, adjust lighting and choose a suitable gear. The overhead camera has to be positioned and you're fiddling with it when you feel a cheek on your thigh and smell peppermint.

PS: An Australian friend claims to use love hotels because they are cheaper. He reckons the down-market, no-frills joints have a better bed price than normal hotels. That's because they don't make money from beds but from the "massage" services they provide. As he says, there's no obligation to use these services. If there was, the hotels would be classed as brothels and the licensing fees would be far higher. He does admit that, on one occasion, he was turfed out of bed in the middle of the night by some heavily tattooed guys who said his time was up and he had to go.

PS: The charming couple in the pic at the top are tanukis. They belong to the raccoon family and are famous for their love life. They are a Japanese version of the Easter Bunny but not as cuddly.

13. Yakuza



The Japanese refer to their crime syndicates as “yakuza”. Most people know they exist but think their chance of meeting a member is minimal ... especially on an overseas trip.

I live on the Gold Coast in Australia and have Japanese neighbours. We recently organised a barbecue for a visiting party of Japanese ladies. We picked a local park as a suitable place to entertain them. I arrived early, with some of my surfing mates and laid claim to one of the barbecue stands and surrounding tables.

The ladies came from Nara, which is an ancient city just up the road from vulgar Osaka and smelly Kobe. It is a very refined place, overflowing with temples and cultural centres. The ladies made a point of saying that, while their husbands worked in Osaka, they resided in far more genteel surroundings.

My surfing mates were a mixed bunch of young Japanese and Australians. The ladies seemed to get along with the Australians but a couple of the Japanese guys caused a bit of an upset. They came from Kobe where people speak with accents that are upsetting to refined ears.

The barbecue got under way and everything was going smoothly when a group of Japanese men began to congregate nearby. One was elderly and dressed in a smart business suit. The lads from Kobe took an immediate interest in him.

They told me the yakuza had arrived and the old guy was an *oyabun*, or *godfather* in mafia parlance. One of the Nara ladies joined us and was informed that the Osaka Yakuza were holidaying on the Gold Coast and had brought their most senior member along with them.

The lady was dismissive of the claim. She insisted that the thuggish looking men were factory employees on a works outing and the elderly man was almost certainly the works manager. The Kobe boys said she would soon see what they were talking about.

Now, I've heard of the secret signs that Free Masons use and I've been subjected to some strange handshakes in my time but when it comes to funny greetings, the yakuza leave the Masons for cold.

As each newcomer approached the elderly man, he bowed respectfully, lent forward and tapped the old chap's testicles. The lady from Nara didn't know where to look. I guess she knew factory workers were uncouth but had no idea their behaviour sank so low. She hurried to the other ladies and returned insisting we relocate to a more agreeable place.

I must admit that I was taken by surprise. Not so much by what happened but by the way the Kobe boys predicted it. I shouldn't have been. I can identify members of Australian criminal gangs from their appearance ... and I'm not just talking about bike gangs.

The criminal classes have a sense of identity. They dress the part and behave the part. Public servants, academics and a heap of others are no different. You can pick them out and predict how they will behave. I have been an academic and I've worked for the government. Individual departments feud with one another and so do the crims. Needless to say, it gets very messy when the yakuza fight.

Dress sets the Yakuza apart but it doesn't stop there. They have a fascination for tattoos. Intricate designs cover every inch of their bodies except the parts that protrude beyond the cuffs and collars of their business suits.

One of the Kobe lads recalled how he once tried to gatecrash a hot-spring party in a posh resort. Hearing male and female voices on the other side of a bamboo fence, he left his all-male pool and, suitably unattired, slipped through a narrow gate. Beautiful young women frolicked with older men. He strolled towards them and was about to

jump into their pool when tattooed figures grabbed him from behind, spun him round, and hurled him back the way he had come. His mates said he was lucky to return with everything intact.

Rumour has it that, in former times, the tattooed skin of dead yakuza was peeled from their bodies and made into lampshades. The Kobe boys reckon it still goes on. They say it is a great honour to be turned into a lampshade. They point out that politicians have statues erected in their memory. Past presidents of Rotary have plaques inscribed. Yakuza are commemorated with lampshades.

I asked about sliced fingers. I'd read about it. The practice is a variant on IRA kneecapping, which was a punishment inflicted upon individuals who failed to do as they were told. The Kobe boys said that finger slicing is self-inflicted and shows remorse for getting things wrong.

The yakuza are sticklers for law enforcement. So, if the oyabun tells you to go out and shoot someone, it is important to get it right. If you shoot the wrong person, you have to admit your mistake. You do this by cutting off the end of a finger and placing it in a small box with a note explaining what happened. You say you are humbly sorry and will be more careful in future. The Kobe boys say they know people with bits of fingers missing

PS: The polite ladies from Nara West would, no doubt, be relieved to hear that the above pic was produced with the aid of tomato paste and photoshop.

14 Man in the middle



There was probably nothing sinister about the three people sitting opposite me. The man was clearly unwell, which would explain why the women were propping him up. Their facemasks were a bit severe but there's no law against covering the face. And there's no law to prevent people dressing alike. For all I knew, the ladies could be sisters caring for a sick relative. All the same, I couldn't help remembering the story about the man in the middle.

My photograph was taken in the Tokyo Metro. The man in the middle story took place in the London Underground and was circulating about thirty years ago. It went something like this:

A young woman boards a train late at night and is seized by a feeling that something is seriously wrong. She glances around and her sense of unease is heightened when she realises there is no way of leaving the carriage for another part of the train.

Three young men sit hunched up on a seat opposite her and one of them is staring at her with wide unblinking eyes. The only other passenger is a middle-aged man. After a while he comes across. The young woman has never seen him before but he talks as if he knows her.

"I'm having trouble with this crossword."

He shows her a newspaper.

"Perhaps you could help."

The young woman looks at the paper and sees that he has written on it in big black letters.

The man in the middle is dead. Get out with me at the next station and we'll call the police.

15 Japanese Castles



My wife's special interest is print making and she never loses an opportunity to visit a craft centre specialising in paper making or woodblock printing. I write historical novels and I like to visit castles. Japan has lots. A few are original. Most are reproductions on old sites.

Despite being on opposite sides of the world. Japan and Europe have much in common. Both derive their culture from ancient civilisations: Rome in Europe's case and China in the case of Japan.

Rome and China were unified states run by bureaucrats and protected by national armies. Medieval Europe and Japan were feudal and that's why they have a lot of castles. There was no central authority in the old days. Power lay in the hands of feudal lords who controlled vast stretches of territory. They went to war with one another and paid lip service to kings and emperors.

The lords had castles and their troops were armed with the latest weapons. Technological skills were similar on both sides of the world but building practices were different. Earthquakes are common in Japan and stone castles, like those in Europe, would soon be shaken down.

The solution was to build in wood and place the castle on a high stone platform made from irregular blocks that would (hopefully) settle back into their original positions after a big shake. My picture is of Kunamoto Castle. The main tower is 30-metres high which gives an idea of its massive scale.

The building is a 1960s reconstruction on the original stone platform. The exterior was made using authentic materials and methods. The interior was constructed using modern materials and houses a museum.

An adjacent building was completed recently and is a faithful copy of the original. It houses the great hall and associated chambers. The magnificent decorations, shown

in my second photograph, are based on careful historical research and are judged correct down to the smallest detail.

The third photograph shows security precautions against ninjas and other assassins. The fourth is of a room in a restored samurai house. The samurai served their lord as soldiers and administrators and were drawn from the knightly classes, just as in Europe.

The feudal age came to an end in Japan at about the same time as in Europe, but with an important difference. In Europe, the kings brought the feudal lords under control. In Japan, one of the lords (Tokugawa of Shogun fame) defeated his rivals and reduced the emperor to a powerless figurehead.

The Tokugawa family ruled for over two hundred years and took Japan into isolation. The country marked time then catapulted itself into the modern age (in the mid-nineteenth century) when the Americans sent a fleet to demand an end to its isolation. I sometimes wonder if the folks in Washington realised the full significance of what they were doing.





Mike's Blog and Author Web Site

For more about Mike and his books

<http://mikejdixon.com>