
Traveling in Japan as easy as the code of the slipper

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Now I know how Bill Murray must have felt.

Not the real Murray, of course. He's an actor. I mean the character he played in "Lost in Translation;" that cute, quirky flick about Japan that American newspaper headlines revive any time they're trying to describe any story about culture shock.

From the moment I got off the plane in Tokyo, this phrase was stuck in my head like a bad TV jingle. But it took on new meaning as soon as I tried to make sense of the vending machines, more common in Japan than Starbucks in Seattle and more confusing than the chaos theory. Though Murray's movie irked me - his character couldn't seem to have any fun in a place I just knew would be fascinating - I can certainly understand how he felt now, after 2 1/2 weeks of trying to figure out Japan.

(I also hit my head a lot.)

Consider this the goofy American male's guide to the Far East.

First, a general tip: The guidebooks point out that the rainy season comes in June, so it might be good to avoid traveling during that time. The guides neglect to tell you about typhoon season, which is pretty much the rainy season on steroids. That begins at the end of August and continues into September.

We began our trip at the end of August, and continued it into September.

Now for the train stations, where most of us are likely to experience our first sense of cultural bewilderment.

The daze sets in the first time we look up at the morass of multicolored train lines, described in Chinese characters (one of three alphabets used in Japan) that denote the names of the Japan Rail stations. These are overlaid with the subway lines (which are sometimes owned by different companies and thus require tickets to be purchased only at the machine that spits out the ticket for that particular company) and finally, the monorail, which is something of a cross between the Japan Rail and the Shinkansen, or bullet trains.

Trying to sort out which mode of transport to take is the hard part. The harder part is trying to figure out which platform (I'd venture 2,948 in Tokyo station alone) to go to reach that particular mode of transport. And the hardest part is determining where to get off once you've safely made it on the right train, subway or monorail car.

Let's say it all goes fine. But once you get off the train, you need to use the bathroom before you study the next map to determine which bus to take to the hotel.

For toilets, there are two options:

The first requires a computer science degree. There are more than a dozen buttons, each of which describes (in Chinese characters) whether you'll be flushing, spraying your backside, spraying your backside with high intensity, spraying your backside with scalding hot water or spraying other regions of the body inappropriate to discuss in family newspapers.

The second kind of toilet is a bit more basic. It's a hole in the floor, perhaps with a lovely ceramic rim, upon which you cannot rest your backside. Sometimes there's a helpful railing, perhaps for disabled people to use to steady themselves. It's even more fun on a Shinkansen (trains that travel up to 300 miles per hour).

Finally, you're "relieved" to find yourself outside the train station and on your bus ride to the hotel.

But you've chosen a Japanese-style inn, or ryokan, to lodge for the evening. It's been described in your tourist books as a charming way to experience Japanese culture. It is certainly a way to experience Japanese culture.

The first thing you learn about a ryokan is what I'll term the "code of the slipper."

There are no shoes allowed in a ryokan, for cleanliness reasons. But it's necessary to wear something to make it to your room without collecting a splinter in your pinky toe, so the innkeeper will kindly offer you a pair of rubber, size 5 (or XXL) slippers to wear to your room. Before entering the room, however, please take the slippers off.

If you need to use the (communal) restroom, please find it down the hallway, but you'll have to put on your slippers to get there. When you arrive at the door, please remove those slippers and put on the bathroom slippers (for cleanliness reasons), and when you're finished programming the toilet and washing your hands, remove the bathroom slippers and put on the hotel slippers.

But please remove the hotel slippers before you reach your room (for cleanliness reasons.)

If you have any trouble in the ryokan, you can call the front desk for help. (Example: after punching in the correct sequence of toilet codes, you use the same handle you used to flush to wash your hands, via a spout on top of the toilet that drains into the basin to be used for the next flush. Because this water is used for filling the basin - to conserve water - and not just washing your hands, however, it does not stop pouring after you're finished washing your hands. If you keep jiggling the handle or flush the toilet a few more times, hoping that this will shut off the water, it will only prolong the endeavor.)

If you do not speak Japanese, simply use the Japanese word for "help!" (found in the "emergency" section of your guidebook) which is "teskete!"

If the front desk clerk responds in rapid-fire Japanese, simply repeat the phrase "teskete!" many times, perhaps throwing in the term for "come in!" to explain you need the clerk to personally attend to your problem.

If the basin fills up in the meantime and the water stops running, simply say "arigato" or "it's OK" several times and hang up. Since the Japanese are known for world-class service, they may call back a few more times and want to speak to you about the previous phone call.

Now perhaps you've finished dinner and are ready for a night out on the town. You could try clothes shopping, but many of the T-shirts you'll find have English written on them, and are rife with profanity arranged in unusual sentence structures. (Warning: If you're more than 6 feet tall, there's probably not much in your size.)

There are, as I mentioned before, an array of vending machines to experiment with the thousands of varieties of green tea available in the country. There's no shortage of shops, with friendly clerks willing to package even the smallest item - a toothpick, for example - in three different kinds of wrapping, all carefully folded and sealed with tape.

There's "Pachinko," which is like casino gambling except that it's played with ball bearings and pins - much like "Plinko" from "The Price is Right." Pachinko parlors feature delightful music played at rock-concert levels and allow pets, carried in purses.

But the most sporting nighttime endeavor in all of Japan is geisha-hunting - and I do mean hunting.

Because there are only 1,000 of the white-paint-faced female entertainers in the country, they are elevated to the status of American movie stars and hunted down in much the same manner as the paparazzi stalked Princess Di.

The great thing is that Westerners are allowed to participate, chasing the geisha and, upon catching one, bombarding them with flash bulbs to the point of near blindness.

Despite this, some of them will agree to actually stop and pose for a picture. We caught six geisha on one particularly fortunate night in Kyoto.

There are, sadly, no prizes awarded to the tourist who catches the most geisha in a given evening. It's more of a bragging rights thing.

As for typhoon season: If you do find yourself sleeping in a hotel room and you flip on the TV to hear the name of your town and the word "typhoon" repeated excitedly by the pleasant weatherman, along with a nifty graphic that shows a typhoon headed directly for your hotel, call the clerk for information.

But in many cases there's no reason to fret. Weather predictions are often wrong here, as in the United States.

Now that you've completed the trip, figured out the slippers, toilets and shopping options, you're ready for a relaxing train ride to the airport.

One final way to experience "real Japan:" Get on the train at the wrong end, and then barrel your way to the car on which your seat is reserved as the train rumbles to a start. If you bring an expedition-sized mountaineering backpack from REI, you'll need to try to avoid decking people as you swing it side to side down the impossibly narrow aisles.

And if you make it through the (air conditioning-free) smoking cars without developing an immediate case of emphysema, congratulations.

You've acclimated. Old Murray would be proud.

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