



# Guidebook to Japan

*What the other guidebooks  
won't tell you*

*Amy Chavez*

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By Amy Chavez

## **Part 1: Traveling in Japan**

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

## Introduction

In this book, I will tell you what Japan is like based on my 12 years of living here and based on over 350 articles I have written for *The Japan Times*. These days, most people in Western countries have heard about geisha, sushi and Zen Buddhism, so I will not spend much time on those topics. Japan is much more than that and sometimes, much less.

You may find certain parts of this book challenge your previous conceptions about Japan. If this happens, I'll have done my job. My aim is to show you the real Japan, not the romantic images nor the often-sensationalized ones found in the media which misrepresent Japan and the Japanese people.

I feel fortunate to have learned many good things during my stay here, and I hope you will learn these things as well through the following essays. Indeed, there is much the Western world can learn from the East, as well as the East learning from us. I feel, however, that the Japanese utilize the experience of the West far more to their advantage than we utilize the experience of the East. There is much to be gained by taking a closer look into Eastern ways of life, including Japan's.

Some of the best information on Japan can be found on the internet; however, sifting through the volumes of information can be intimidating, and separating the good from the not so good takes an experienced eye, not to mention hours upon hours of time. Since this book cannot cover all the aspects of such a complex society and nation as Japan, I wanted to provide you with some of the best places on the web to go should you wish to find out more on a particular topic. After each essay, you'll find links to internet urls for further reading. I've attempted to put together the best, well-rounded collection of sites on Japan that offer information through a variety of mediums such as websites, blogs (weblogs), photos, video clips, songs, quizzes and games.

In addition to urls, I am arming you with the following weapons you'll need to get through your Japan experience: a samurai sword, a ninja throwing star, and a scroll. Look for these icons throughout the book to find corresponding  *Sword Tips* for cultural clues,  *Sparring Japanese* for survival Japanese phrases, and  *Recommended Reading*, for when you want more in-depth information on a subject.

The pronunciation of these phrases has been translated into the Roman alphabet, thus certain sounds such as the slightly rolled "r" are represented as merely "r," since our alphabet cannot accommodate for many of the different sounds in Japanese. In the case of the same consonant doubled, as in the word "natto" (fermented beans), the double "t" indicates a short stop between the two sounds, as in "nat-to." This romanization, called **romaji** in Japanese, is based upon the Hepburn system, a widely accepted method of romanization. For more on the Hepburn system and the Japanese writing systems, see the Guide to the Japanese Writing System at <http://www.kanji.org/kanji/japanese/kanaroma/kanaroma.htm>

Every effort has been made to make your experience learning about Japan fun, easy and as up-to-date as possible. With dozens of links to the best websites on Japan, this book will be constantly updated as sites close down and new ones appear. So, if it's been a while since you purchased this book, you might want to purchase an updated copy. Updated e-book versions, with hyperlinks, are available for US\$1 at the Dollar Book Store at <http://www.mooooshop.com/mooobook/order>

Please be aware that links come and go on the internet and although I have tried to include only those of some permanence, there is no guarantee all the urls will still be available at the time you try to access them. In addition, urls get bought and sold with frequency on the internet, so it is possible a listed url will take you to an unintended place. It is not my intention to direct you to any link other than those directly related to Japan or the information in the essays in this book. The internet is a vast and valuable resource, but it is not perfect, so understand the risks before you delve in. Should you come across an inappropriate link, please let me know so I may replace it with a more worthy one. I have

tried to avoid commercial sites except in the case where the product is truly unique or entertaining, or the idea novel (such as the "origami ball," a wadded piece of paper that sells for \$12.99), in which the link is provided for your amusement only. Neither the author nor the publisher endorses any of the links or the information provided. The links are only provided for your reading pleasure and entertainment.

If you know of a website on Japan you feel is worthy of inclusion in this book, please send the url on to me at [GuidebookToJapan@yahoo.com](mailto:GuidebookToJapan@yahoo.com) so I may consider using it in future editions or updates of the book.

In the following pages, a wonderful Eastern culture is waiting to be discovered. Enjoy Japan!

*Amy Chavez*

Shiraishi Island, Japan

October 2004

## **PART I: TRAVELING IN JAPAN**

## How do I use a Japanese-style toilet?

The Asian-style squat toilet still rules in Japan. The western-style sit-down toilet is making inroads however and there is almost always a western-style option at public toilets. It's usually just one stall, however, so you may have to wait for it.

On the other hand, most new Japanese homes are equipped with the Western "porcelain god." Always out to impress, the Japanese have made elaborate renditions to the Western toilet, elevating it to the status of "porcelain goddess." These stunning home toilets are equipped with cloth seat covers, heated seats, bidets and dryers, all ready to receive the esteemed buttocks.

There will be some point when you will have to use the Japanese style toilet, so you may as well learn now. Americans will find the Asian-style toilets, well, disappointing. Japanese style toilets require far too much physical prowess for the average American. One friend of mine will never forgive me for not having warned her about the toilets before she visited. When my father came to visit, he had a map of the city in which he marked all the buildings that offered Western-style toilets. I heard about a foreign English teacher who was so perplexed by the squat and flush toilets, he removed his pants completely every time he used the toilet.

Why all the toilet prejudice? After all, how many minutes a day are you in the toilet anyway? Especially in Japan, it's only seconds, since you're squatting. Japanese people are in and out in moments. No mirrors, and sometimes, no soap. Perhaps that's why there is seldom a line in front of a public toilet in Asia—people avoid using them if at all possible.

There is also something called the pseudo-Western style toilet, in which a plastic Western style toilet is placed over the Japanese toilet.

Some western-style toilets have illustrated instructions on the inside of the lid. Apparently, when Western-style toilets were first introduced to Japan, some people didn't know how to use them and stood on the toilet seat and squatted. For the boys, the illustration shows a picture of a man standing facing the toilet. For girls it shows a picture of a girl sitting on the toilet. The man looks more like he is waiting for the bus and the girl looks more like she's waiting at the doctor's office. I've never seen instructions on how to use a Japanese-style toilet however.

If I could write the instructions, they'd be:

Enter the bathroom and put on the bathroom shoes. I know what you're thinking: Bowling shoes, golf shoes and now I need toilet shoes? Yes. You'll understand why in a moment.

The toilet is the porcelain-lined oblong hole, level with the floor, which looks more like an elegant bathtub for Cockatiels. Climb up onto the step—the flat area that houses the toilet. Don't be shy about stepping up to a toilet. Just because it is in an elevated position does not mean it is more important than you. You're going to prove this in a few moments.

Stand facing the wall with your feet shoulder-width apart. Line up your feet on both sides of the toilet, (sometimes there are markers showing where to put your feet) and bend your knees as if you were about to do the limbo. You may notice a wet area around your feet. This means the Cockatiels have been splashing around in the tub. (Thus, the toilet shoes).

You'll need some athletic talent to perform the next part. If you don't do yoga, now would be a good time to start. Or, you can do some stomping exercises like the sumo wrestlers do before a round. The important thing is to be limber enough so as not to pull a muscle as you lower yourself into a squat position over the toilet.

After you've warmed up, pull your shorts down. Leave them where you normally would, just below your bottom. Now bend your knees and lower yourself into a squatting position. Hover.

As you lower yourself down, you'll expect to hear the announcement: "Secure all loose items before riding this ride." But you won't hear this and instead, anything in your shirt pocket, including your cell phone, will fall into the toilet. Rescue all items immediately.

You'll know you've successfully achieved the squat position when you get an uneasy feeling you forgot to lock the door and, any second now, someone is going to open the door and have a full view of your posthumous behind.

Optional: Push the button on the machine in the wall for the sound of fake toilet flushing so people in other stalls won't know you have such bad knees that you're still standing up, engineering a human fountain. When you're finished, bring yourself up to a standing position (if you're not already there) and flush the toilet.

Remember, ladies, no flushing of foreign objects, especially Cockatiels.

As you flush the toilet, you'll notice Japanese-style toilets recycle the clean tank water by channeling it through a faucet on the back of the tank so you can rinse your hands. The small basin may be full of plastic objects or aquarium toys such as colored rocks, plastic palm trees and plastic fish. No one has really figured out why the Japanese do this. Perhaps it is to appease the Cockatiels and make them think they're in Disney Land.

Caution: If you stay in the squat position too long, it'll cut off the blood circulation and your legs will fall off when you finally try to stand up. Also, too much alcohol can adversely affect the squat position resulting in poor aim (I stress—toilet shoes!).

If you find that squatting is definitely not for you, then you'll soon locate all the McDonald's in town. If however, you made it through the entire procedure smoothly, you'll understand why the Japanese-style toilet is preferable to setting your bottom down on the same seat where others have set down theirs.

Furthermore, bathing Cockatiels are far less threatening than the Tidy Bowl man.



For pictures of a Japanese-style toilet, the fountain on the back of the toilet and toilet slippers, see <http://www.richard-seaman.com/Travel/Japan/Misc/Toilets>

See the the ultimate guide to clean (and dirty) toilets in Tokyo, see Tokyo Toilet Map [http://www.asahi-net.or.jp/~AD8Y-HYS/index\\_e.htm](http://www.asahi-net.or.jp/~AD8Y-HYS/index_e.htm)



**Sword Tips:** In Japan, the toilet stalls reach all the way down to the floor, so it's hard to tell when the toilet is occupied. The proper way to check is to knock two times. If someone is inside, they'll knock back twice. You'll find a toilet flushing sound simulator on the wall. This is to cover up the sounds of your peeing. Push the button—It's fun!

There are the **kanji** characters for "big" and "little" written on the flushing handle. Whereas in English we say "number one" and "number two" to distinguish between urination and defecation, the Japanese say big and small. You guess which is which and use the big flush or small flush accordingly. Isn't Japan exotic?



Sparring Japanese: Koko ni wa, youshiki toire ga arimasuka? Is there a Western style toilet here?