

HOMESTAY IN JAPAN – SOME HELPFUL HINTS & TIPS

Entering the home:

Take off your shoes and leave them inside the outer front door, facing outwards.

Make sure that your socks are whole and not too smelly!!

You will probably be given slippers to wear around the house – they won't fit because the Japanese all have smaller feet, but do try to wear them. Watch when going up or down stairs. Do not wear these slippers outside nor into the toilet (where separate ones are supplied).

Be ready to bow when you meet family members, particularly older ones. Watch not to bang heads

In your bedroom:

Don't be surprised to find no bed in the room. You'll sleep on a futon mattress which will be rolled up into a cupboard during the day. The mattress will be covered (a bit like a duvet) and you will then have a sheet and blankets or thin duvet to cover yourself with.

You may be in the guest room which may have an altar to the families dead ancestors – don't touch the fruit or sweets etc that are left there!!

The internal walls (to other rooms) are often made of paper with small wooden dividers. Be really careful not to lean luggage or yourself on them as they will tear. Equally sound travels so don't just shut the door and say "That meal was really crap etc" as your hosts will hear you!!

Eating and Drinking:

The food will be placed buffet style on the table so you will not be faced with a whole plate of something that you don't want to eat. Use the serving chopsticks (never your own personal ones) to put small amounts of food onto your plates. Taste everything and then go back for more of what you like. It is polite to lift plates/bowls up to your mouth and to slurp. There may be no cutlery other than chopsticks so soup is drunk and then chunks eaten with chopsticks. You will get similar meals at breakfast, lunch and dinner. Soup followed by something and rice. The Japanese have almost no desserts so don't expect anything sweet. Rice comes all stuck together not free-flowing as in UK, but is easier to eat with chopsticks. Miso (bean-paste) soup is the most common. You may be seating at a table about 18" high, so may be crosslegged on the floor. Practice as it can be quite uncomfortable for long periods. You may be lucky and have a western-style room with full-size table and chairs, but these are not too common. Green tea is served after most meals.

They will always put their hands together as if in prayer and say "Itadakimas" before starting to eat. Don't start until this has been said – it just means "Bon Appetit or Enjoy your Meal".

In Japan it is considered really impolite to pour yourself a drink of juice etc, so wait to be served. It is also impolite to totally finish the drink so always leave a little in the bottom of the glass.

Laundry:

Make sure that you have kept some clothes aside and clean, as in past years Scouts have happily headed for a bath using the hosts towels and left all their dirty clothes after camp in a big pile on their floor to return and find that they have all gone to the wash and only traditional Japanese kimonos are available until their clothes dry. As the families may not be able to read English and not understand washing instructions on clothes do not give them anything coloured that will run or anything woollen that will shrink. Be really careful to sort your own clothes for washing.

Toilets:

The toilet may have all sorts of electronic buttons which act as a bidet and blow-dry you etc. Get shown what buttons to press. Handwashing basin is contained in top of toilet cistern to save space.

Bathing:

Most houses have their own very small bathroom, but some will not. If your house does have a bathroom then the following are the normal rules, but please check.

Always wash completely (soap and rinse) outside the bath. There will be basins and a tap in the bathroom to tip water over yourself. Only once you are absolutely clean and soap free can you go into the bath. The water will already be in and will be very hot. The baths are short, but deeper than ours. Don't worry if water leaks over the side onto the floor – that is meant to happen. Ease yourself in gradually and let the hot water open your pores and relax you. Enjoy the experience. Do not pull the plug / empty the bathwater. Everyone will use the same water, although as the guest you will probably be offered the first bath. There will be a thick plastic/polystyrene insulated lid for the bath that fits on it to keep the heat from escaping. The baths are on a thermostat and are kept warm for weeks at a time.

There will be a separate sink somewhere for brushing teeth/shaving etc.

Public Bathhouses: The houses/flats are very small and some do not have baths of their own. Even if they do, many prefer to use public bathhouses. In these you enter and remove all your clothes, placing them in a locker or by giving them in a basket to an attendant. There are separate male and female baths. Then, covering yourself with a hand towel, you go through to the washing area where you sit on a small plastic stool facing a wall with mirrors. Again you must properly wash and rinse yourself here using the plastic bowls etc provided. Once you are absolutely clean and soap/shampoo-free, you can move to the bathing area. There are usually a number of different baths of different temperatures and often a sauna. You can start with a tepid one, work your way up to a really hot one, then the sauna, then the ice-cold one and start the circuit again. It really is most enjoyable and an experience that you shouldn't miss if you get the chance.

Gifts:

Japanese are very much into giving of gifts. Having lots and lots of small gifts is a good idea and if you know the make-up of their family in advance make sure that you have something for everyone. Light things like dishtowels, small calendars, pens and golf items always go down well. A few smellies (soap etc) for granny and a whisky miniature for grandad will be much appreciated. Make sure that they are nicely wrapped. If you don't know about brothers/sisters in the family beforehand then wrap in two different patterns of paper –one for males and one for females and swap between the rest of the group during homestay to get what you need. As there will be two of you per house, make sure that you discuss presents beforehand and don't buy the same things!!

Language:

Make the effort to learn the simple words for please / thank you / goodnight / good morning etc and if you are allergic to anything make sure that you know the necessary word(s). Japanese rarely say the word “No” which they find rude. It's better to see “Not just now, maybe later, well not really or it's okay I've had enough”. There is no problem saying “Yes”!!

Alcohol:

You can buy beer etc in vending machines in hotels, but the age for drinking is 20, so it is illegal if under that age. The Japanese do enjoy their drink and you may well be offered alcohol in homestay, but it's OK to say no thanks. The rice wine (Saki) they drink is often served hot.

