

Japanese Project: *Seeing the Light*

The photographic project, *Seeing the Light*, documents the annual winter influx of Japanese tourists to Yellowknife. The project was funded by an Arts Council grant, awarded by the Government of the Northwest Territories under the auspices of the Department of Education, Culture & Employment. It is now on indefinite loan to the Northern Frontier Regional Visitors Centre in Yellowknife.

Land of the Rising Sun meets Land of the Midnight Sun

Near the northern tip of Hokkaido, Japan, the northern lights can be seen about once every 10 years, whereas in Yellowknife we see them on average 243 nights of the year. While we Yellowknifers can be a little blasé about the Aurora, the Japanese take a 20-hour flight from Tokyo to Yellowknife, and pay between \$1,500 to \$3,500 Cdn for a 3-day visit to see the northern lights. Why?

It is impossible to talk of the Japanese appreciation of the aurora without mentioning Shintoism that, along with Buddhism, is practised by most Japanese. Shinto can be seen primarily as a form of nature worship that evolved around the reverence of *kami*. Motoori Norinaga, a scholar of the late 18th Century described it thus: “Whatever seemed strikingly impressive, possessed the quality of excellence and virtue, and inspired a feeling of awe was called kami”.

Thus, in pursuit of *kami*, among things, our guests fly in from Tokyo, one of the most modern cities in the world with a population of some 12 million. The city where two million people per day pass through Shinjuku subway station alone; where the bullet train travels at speeds of up to 270 km per hour; and golfers tee off from one of the many multi-storey vertical golf courses. During a typical January, where it might be 6 degrees Celsius in Tokyo, the Japanese arrive in Yellowknife where it could be –30 degrees Celsius, with a wind-chill of –45.

Not all the tourists come from Japan however. Some Japanese arrive on domestic flights from elsewhere in Canada where they have been working or studying. These tourists are usually able and willing to speak English, whereas the tourists who fly in from Japan are often uncomfortable conversing in English. This is because, although English is taught for at least 6 years at school level, the focus is on reading rather than speech.

Japanese tourism to Yellowknife began in the early 1990s and increased steadily until the September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks. Thereafter the number of Japanese visitors dropped from 14,000 annually to about 9,000, dealing a serious blow to an industry that had generated approximately \$21 million annually for the city of Yellowknife. The threat of SARS, Mad Cow and the Iraq war did not help the situation.

Connecting with the World

Japan has a history of isolation. From the 1630s, self-imposed isolation for two centuries made it illegal for the Japanese to trade or visit with foreign countries. This came to an end in 1853 when the US sent warships with the demand that Japan open itself to trade. With the advent of the Meiji Restoration in 1968, Japan surged ahead into the modern world, throwing off feudalism and embracing industrialisation.

Increasingly, the Japanese realised that learning to speak English was integral to the “internationalisation” of Japan. After the WWII, many Japanese did what is known as *ryūgaku*, or study English abroad. And in the mid-1980s, Japan established the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program. Aside from teaching English to Japanese learners, the aim of this program was to provide learners with international perspectives, through their contact with teachers from English-speaking countries.

As contact increases with the rest of the world, Japanese society is undergoing change. Language researchers are beginning to find these changes reflected in the Japanese language, long known for being a language embedded with social roles. This has been notably so with the use of language by young Japanese women, many of who are challenging their gender roles. It is no surprise, therefore, that Yellowknife has attracted an increasing number of young women tourists in their 20s (although this trend apparently reversed somewhat in 2002).

Japanese culture is fascinating yet most of us know little about it and have scant opportunity to learn more of the Japanese, since most of their visits are brief.

Where they come from

The Japanese come from a country made up of four main islands, a number of island chains and thousands of small islands and islets in the Pacific Ocean. Sixty-one percent of Japan’s land mass is covered with mountains and forests. Habitable land is confined to 24% of the country, which is where most of the population live (65%). This creates a stark contrast between the high density living areas and the uninhabitable but beautiful mountain regions. It has been said that perhaps it is because the Japanese live in one of the most beautiful parts of the world, that affirmation of nature is a sacred component of Shinto devotion.

Interesting facts

- Japan is known as the *vertical society*, in which social interactions are determined by social rank. However, this hierarchical structure is offset by the need for consensus in all matters, making it a very egalitarian society.
- Although Shinto is the dominant religion in Japan, the country has no official religion.

- The Japanese have a 4,000-character alphabet. The Japanese use two phonetic alphabets simplified from these characters, while a third phonetic alphabet makes use of Roman letters.
- While written Japanese is based on Chinese alphabet characters, spoken Japanese differs significantly from spoken Chinese.
- Japan has a constitutional monarchy and the national legislature is known as the Diet.
- The Liberal Democratic Party is the most dominant political party in Japan.
- Japan has the speediest train service in the world.
- Japan leads the way in shipbuilding, and is known for building the world's largest ships.
- Japan's automobile industry is second only to the USA.
- Most of Japan's electricity is produced with nuclear power.
- Japan has little in the way of mineral resources and must import materials such as oil, iron ore, coking coal, and copper, among others.
- Japan has the lowest crime rate in the world.
- Japanese men and women enjoy the longest lifespan in the world.
- Worldwide, the Japanese people have the highest rate of personal savings.
- Japanese property prices are the highest on the world. This gave rise to Japan being called "the bubble economy", in which the land-centric Japanese economy was regarded as inflated beyond its actual value. In the 1990s the "bubble" burst and a recession set in.
- The Japanese cherish simplicity in all things, including their dress, their homes, art forms and behaviour.
- The Japanese are accustomed to sitting and sleeping on the floor. This is why they take off their shoes before entering their houses.
- Bathing is important to the Japanese for purposes of hygiene and relaxation. They wash themselves with soap outside the bath and share the bathwater. They bathe at least once a day, and may get into the bath several times in one evening.
- If a Japanese person has a cold they will wear a (surgical) mask in public.
- The most popular beverage in Japan is green tea (served without milk or sugar), although coffee is starting to become more common.
- The Japanese eat more fish than beef because, in a country with little arable land, beef is very expensive.
- Dessert is not a Japanese custom, although fresh fruit is sometimes served after a meal. The Japanese are known to eat unusual (to us) concoctions such as spaghetti sandwiches, basil leaf ice cream, red bean ice cream, and hot cocoa with a 2% chilli sauce, among others (Yellowknifer, Rosanna Strong, who has tried sweet potato ice-cream, sesame ice-cream and green tea ice-cream, enthused "they're all fantastic").
- The Japanese have been said to prefer approaching matters intuitively rather than rationally, and to value feelings over logic, and sensitivity over intelligence.
- The average commute to work for a Japanese businessperson is two hours.
- The Japanese are more comfortable working in groups rather than singly.

- Duty to one's co-workers, families, teachers and nation is highly valued.
- Japanese workers work until around 10pm, including Saturdays, work overtime without being paid for it, sometimes give up holidays in favour of work, and may even overnight at the office so that they can get an early start the next morning.
- Career advancement is determined by seniority rather than ability.
- Most Japanese fathers only spend time with their children on Sunday.
- Sumo and baseball are national sports in Japan, with baseball having been played in Japan since the 1870s.

Where we differ

- We drive on the right side of the road, they drive on the left. Likewise, to turn a light on, we flip a light switch up, and they flip it down; while we open jars by turning the lid anti-clockwise, the Japanese turn it clockwise.
- We enjoy sunsets, while the Japanese get more enjoyment from watching the moon.
- Whereas we focus on time management, the Japanese care about using space efficiently.
- Whereas we shake hands with one another, the Japanese traditionally bow to each other.
- When pouring a drink, we give our guests a full glass whereas the Japanese custom is to fill it halfway.
- If we want to indicate ourselves, we point to our chest. The Japanese will point to their nose.
- We open gifts in front of the giver, whereas the Japanese open them after that person has departed.
- We associate the colour black with death, whereas the Japanese associate white with death.
- Whereas Western culture has been described as the "guilt culture" (behaviour curbed by an inner principle), Japanese social behaviour has been understood as guided by an external fear of shame.
- The Japanese read books by beginning at the back cover, they write from right to left on a page, and put footnotes at the top of the page.

Japanese culture

While it is normally questionable to generalise about any national group of people, in the case of the Japanese, they are deliberately homogenous, and proud of that. Much of their culture centres on creating social harmony (or *wa*, as it is known) through conformity. Thus, social etiquette in Japan is highly refined and has taken on the status of morality. The resulting harmony is regarded as the first priority of Japanese interpersonal and social behavior, and is facilitated by the twin concepts of *tatemae* and *honne*. The latter represents one's true feelings while *tatemae* refers to the face one presents to the world.

The following are some of the manners that *tatema*e would preclude the Japanese from mentioning to us:

Gestures that could make the Japanese feel welcome

- Punctuality is important to the Japanese.
- It is good manners to put “-san” after someone’s last name (or “-kun” after a young boy’s name or “-chan” after a girl’s name). However, never introduce yourself as Tsetta-san, for example.
- If you have a store, you might like to know that the Japanese consider it bad manners to hand money directly to anyone. They would prefer to put their money in a tray on the counter. You can put their change in the tray too. Outside of the store, if one had occasion to give money to give a Japanese person, it is acceptable to put it in an envelope.
- Avoid chewing gum when serving Japanese customers, or in similar working environments.
- In formal settings, it is customary to exchange business cards when meeting for the first time. You should use both hands to present your card (or *meishi*, as it is called) to the other person, right side up to them, upside down to yourself. You receive their card with both hands too. It is important to appear to study the card before putting it away. And never stow it in your pants pocket and sit on it in their presence.
- If you take photographs of the Japanese (with your camera), it is expected that you will give them a copy too.

Little things that can avoid misunderstandings

- The Japanese value harmony and therefore often say what others want to hear, rather than offer any uncomfortable truths.
- The Japanese sometimes ask, what Westerners consider to be, overly personal questions about matters such as one’s salary. They do so only to ascertain your social standing so that they can address you appropriately.
- If you ask a Japanese person to do you a favour that they are unwilling to do, they are likely to tell you that this “will be difficult”. This means no. This is because the Japanese are uncomfortable using the word “no”. When Westerners decline so directly, the Japanese experience it as impolite.
- If a Japanese person waved their hand up and down (palm facing down), this would mean, “come here”. Our western way, palm-up and closing our hand is only used to call animals in Japan.
- When a Japanese person fans their hand sideways a few times in front of their face, they are saying no.
- The Japanese do not like to stand too close to the person with whom they are speaking.

- If you see a Japanese person struggling with a suitcase and you ask if you can help them, you may be refused. This is because it is considered good manners to initially refuse an offer of help, even if they really want your help. It is customary to offer help three times.
- Avoid giving gifts to the Japanese (such as flowers in a bouquet) that contain an even number of articles. Especially avoid giving four of anything.
- It is the Japanese custom to call people by their last name.
- It is respectful to attach a title, such as Mr, to that person's occupation (i.e. Mr Tour Guide).
- It is not considered impolite to talk with your mouth full or slurp your food.
- Negative questions (in English) such as “don't you want another helping?” can result in confusing answers from the Japanese, such as “Yes, thank you”. We would assume that our guest wanted another helping when in fact they do not. The problem is a grammatical one; in Japanese, the yes or no answers the negative part of the question.

Try not

- Blow your nose in public. It is considered extremely bad manners and should be done in a washroom.
- Likewise, it is bad manners to chew on one's fingernails, chew on a pen, or lick one's fingers in public.
- It is also bad manners to eat while walking in public.
- Dressing down is not acceptable.
- And “Sayonara”, the Japanese word for goodbye is reserved for someone older than or more important than oneself. It is not for use with peers, children or family members.

Do

- Humility is highly valued by the Japanese. Therefore if one is, for example, complimented on a job well done, it is polite to reply with something like “somehow I manage”.
- Or if one was presenting a Japanese person with a gift, one could say (as Canadians sometimes do) “it's just a little something for you”.
- Similarly, when offering food, one could do as the Japanese do and say something along the lines of “it won't suit your taste but...”.
- Or, if you are offered tea, for example, accepting with slight hesitation is regarded as humble and therefore well mannered.

If you ever dine with a Japanese person you could:

- Do as the Japanese do and eat your food in a particular order. For example, first eat a chopstick full of rice, then one of the side dishes, followed by more rice. This is because it is impolite to eat one dish at a time.
- Try not dip your chopsticks more than three centimeters into your bowl, nor lick the ends of your chopsticks.
- When not in use, place your chopsticks on the rests provided, rather than rest them on top of your bowl. Or if you are finished, place your chopsticks inside their paper sheath and on your dining tray.

As with all cultures, it's easy to list our respective cultural differences before arriving at an understanding of our common humanity, and the more profound things that we doubtless have in common. It's also interesting to note, that as one explores another culture, one becomes increasingly aware of curious aspects of our own culture.

Some useful Japanese phrases

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| – Good morning: | <i>Ohio-go-zye-mas</i> |
| – Good day: | <i>Con-nee-chee-wa</i> |
| – Good evening: | <i>Com-ban-wa</i> |
| – My name is...: | <i>Wa-ta-she-wa...</i> |
| – What is your name?: | <i>O-na-my-wa?</i> |
| – Pleased to meet you: | <i>Do-zo-yo-ro-she-koo</i> |
| – How are you?: | <i>O-gen-key-des-ka?</i> |
| – Fine thanks: | <i>Gen-key-des</i> |
| – Thank you: | <i>A-ree-ga-tow-go-zai-mas</i> |
| – You're welcome: | <i>Do-ee-ta-she-mash-tay</i> |
| – Yes (not necessarily agreement): | <i>High</i> |

Further reading

- Traditional Japanese Culture & Modern Japan by John K. Gillespie
- NTC's Dictionary of Japanese Cultural Code Words by Boye Lafayette De Mente
- Appreciations of Japanese Culture by Donal Keane
- In the Realm of the Dying Emperor by Norma Field
- Outnation - A Search for the Soul of Japan by Jonathan Rauch
- Speed Tribes - Children of the Japanese Bubble by Karl Taro Greenfield
- You Gotta Have Wa by Robert Whiting

Thanks

Firstly, I would like to thank the many Japanese visitors who made me most welcome as I accompanied them on tours in and around Yellowknife this winter. I am indebted to you for your graciousness, and for renewing the way I see the Northern lights. I would also like to thank the Northwest Territories Arts Council for the funds to undertake the project, and Boris Atamanenko, Community Programs Manager for GNWT Education, Culture & Employment, for his support. Immense thanks to Seiji Suzuki for his inspiring tour company and the many amazing guides and staff at Canadian Ex Aurora Tours. Without their help this project could not have taken place. Many thanks also to staff at Raven Tours, especially Michiko Furuta. Thanks to Tim Atherton, for his technical expertise and for printing the exhibition; Rosanna Strong for initiating me into snowshoeing, as well as for sharing her secret cranberry cake recipe; and Brook Carpenter for making available at this exhibition his insightful ethnography on Japanese tourism in the Northwest Territories. Thanks also to Diane Baldwin and Walt Humphries for their support for this project from the outset. And, finally, my heartfelt thanks to Warwick, Gabriel and Thomas, who let me abscond with my camera and tripod for many days and nights this winter.

Biography

I am a social documentary photographer. I have held a number of solo exhibitions, and have also participated in several group exhibitions. I am originally from South Africa, and traveled widely before settling in Yellowknife. A self-taught photographer, I've had informal training with two of South Africa's foremost social documentary photographers, David Goldblatt and Paul Weinberg.

Personal note

My first experience of Japanese culture was, oddly enough, in Zambia while on a geological field trip. The only other woman on that long convoy of 4x4 vehicles was a Japanese person called Tachiko. What began as a few pleasantries about Baobab trees and Weaver birds developed into a friendship that has spanned more than ten years, and continues today.

Technical notes

A background in social anthropology informed my exploration of Japanese culture, while I used participant observation in an effort to capture more natural images of the tourists.

These photographs have been taken using a Canon 10D digital camera. All the images were shot in RAW format, and then processed on a PC using *Capture One*. After this the images were fine-tuned using Adobe Photoshop Elements. For images taken at the high ISO speeds required by the often low-light conditions, I used *Neat Image*, which is a program designed to clean up “noisy” images.