

TOKYO TALES

By Carole Hallett Mobbs



of the night are a different matter altogether. Many people have heard of the train “pushers”, who physically cram far more passengers than one would think possible onto the train. It’s quite a scary experience and very uncomfortable

POLITE SOCIETY

The Japanese are universally renowned for their politeness and good manners. An internet search for ‘Japanese etiquette’ displays a multitude of rules and guidelines, from the correct use of chopsticks to the intricacies of exchanging *meishi* (business cards).

Bowing is the most conspicuous feature of Japanese courtesy. Bows vary from a brief nod to an very formal 90 degree ‘apology’ bow. A formal bow is slightly disconcerting at first, but it makes me feel like royalty and I like it. As an example, once a transaction at the post office has been concluded, the cashier takes a step back, stands to attention with his hands by his side and performs a precise, deep bow. Observing business associates meeting up can be rather comical. The depth and duration of the bow signifies respect. So, if one person’s bow is longer or deeper than the others expect, it is polite to bow again... and again, back and forth in a series of progressively lighter bows until everyone evens out and business can begin.

Mobile phones are, not surprisingly, very popular here, but are *never* used on public transport. Phones have a key called a ‘Manner Button’. When activated the phone switches to ‘silent mode’ and diverts incoming calls to voicemail. I have never heard a telephone conversation on the train, although everyone is glued to their phone’s screen, texting or playing games, all in delightful silence.

Young men and women readily give up their seat on public transport to anyone who

needs it, and everyone readily moves along so I can sit beside my daughter. Conversely, rush hours and the last train

and unpleasant, but nobody complains at all.

People are also extraordinarily helpful. Many times I have been standing on the pavement looking lost; because I am. Within minutes, someone will approach with an offer of help. Many go out of their way to ensure you reach your destination. One day, I asked a gentleman the way to a particular shop in a complicated area of the city. He didn’t speak English but understood my request and gave me directions. I set off, but after a minute, he came running after me to tell me I’d taken a wrong turning, then took me there himself.

Smoking in restaurants is commonplace, but smoking whilst walking is frowned upon. Special ‘smoking areas’ are set up at regular points complete with shelter, ashtrays and some particularly imaginative signs, known as ‘Smoking Manners’. For the full range of these amusing signs, see www.conbinibento.com/photos/index.php?gallery=.%2FSmoking%20Manners

Sayonara for now!

