

TOKYO TALES

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Vending Heaven

We're all familiar with vending machines, but Japan takes the concept to an entirely new level. In 2000 there were an estimated 5.6 million vending machines in Japan; that's about one for every 20 people. You don't have to go far to find one and in some places there are entire banks of them as shown in the photo above.

Japan's first official vending machine appeared in 1904, was made of wood and dispensed stamps. However, it wasn't until the 100 yen coin was minted in 1967 that the machines really took off. Due to the low levels of vandalism and respect for other people's property here, these machines survive and flourish.

The main goods sold are soft drinks and cigarettes, although many other fascinating products are occasionally spotted. My favourite so far has been a flower vending machine at one of the main rail stations. It dispenses a small fresh bouquet to the over-worked businessman who had no time to remember his wife's birthday.

Drink vending machines are fascinating due to the range of beverages offered. During the winter months hot drinks are available including cans of green tea, hot chocolate, soup and a huge variety of coffees. That's right, cans of hot coffee, something almost unique to Japan. In the summer months the hot drinks are replaced by cold thirst-quencher, with iced coffee and tea instead of the heated ones. If you like your coffee sweet, as I do, canned coffee is quite palatable. Unfortunately, the same can't be said of some of the cold drinks available. Most are

'vitamin' or 'sports' drinks, the most popular of which is enticingly called Pocari Sweat. I've also been tempted, but not quite brave enough, to try a drink which boasts the appealing tag line "when cider meets condensed milk"! I also particularly like the beer vending machines.

If you fancy a snack while out and about, never fear, there are vending machines selling food too.

Machines dispensing Cup

Udon, similar to Pot Noodles™, are widespread. Once the pot is dispensed, you peel back the lid and place the cup back in the machine where hot water is poured in it. Wait a few minutes, and your meal is ready. If this seems too much work, then you can find machines that directly vend hot food such as chips, dumplings and fried chicken. I have no idea how these work and I'm certainly not prepared to try the chicken.

Another favourite is the ice-cream vending machine but sadly this is usually empty in the searing summer heat. My daughter's favourite is a Hello Kitty popcorn machine which is, of course, pink, cute and with a massive Kitty on the front. Much entertainment is had watching the moving parts going slowly up and down before a massive bag of freshly popped corn appears.

Although I haven't yet seen all of these, some other products vended by these machines are sacks of rice, eggs, milk, DVDs, bags of ice and umbrellas.

I think vending machine spotting could become quite a hobby for me!

